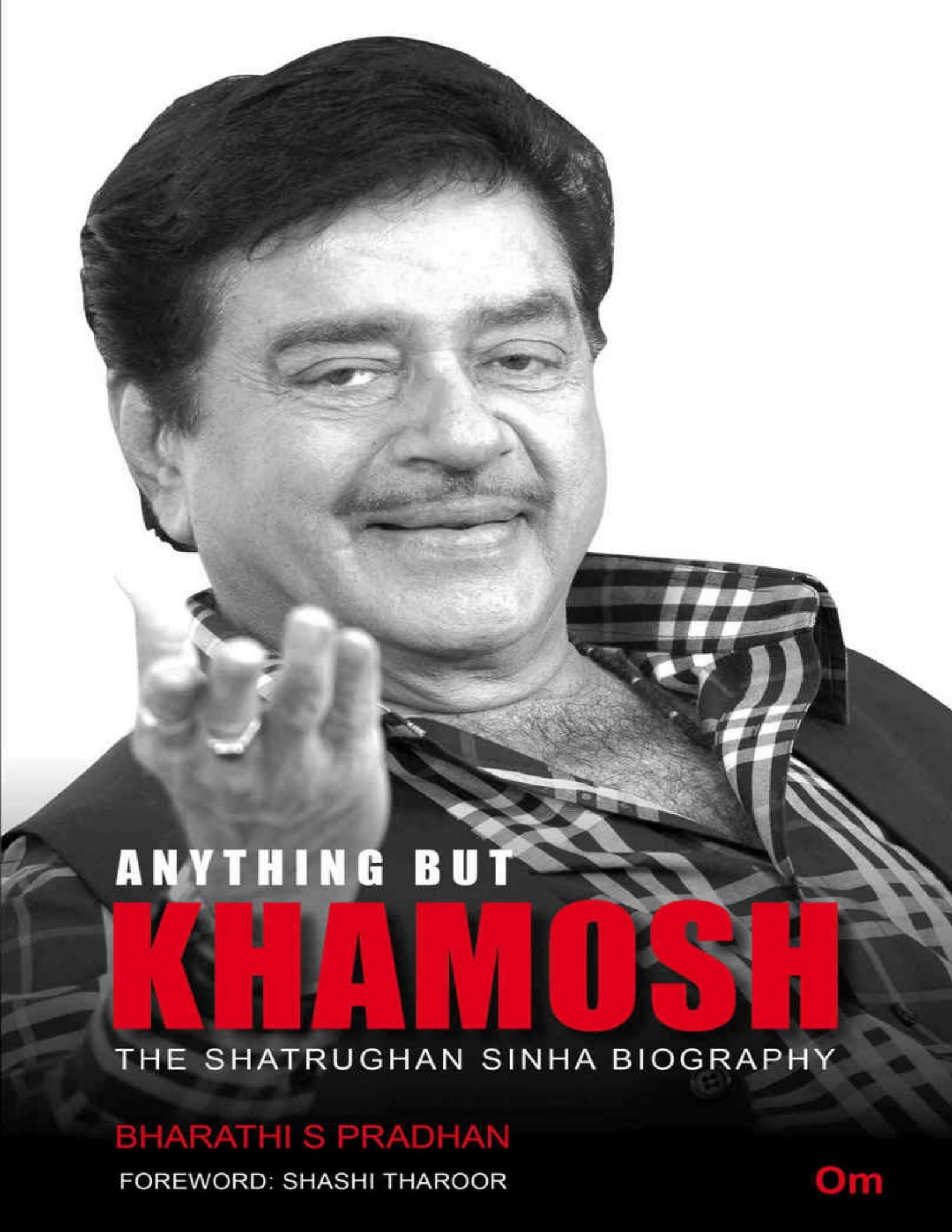

ANYTHING BUT KHAMOSH

THE SHATRUGHAN SINHA BIOGRAPHY

BHARATHI S PRADHAN

FOREWORD: SHASHI THAROOR

Om

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Foreword

All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players.

And yet when the hero rose, the stage froze to watch his act in *Silence*.

Rarely do biographies bustle with the drama and excitement which *Anything But Khamosh* brings to the fore. The story of Shatrughan Sinha's life and career is engaging, involving as it does a candid account of the Hindi film industry, with a glimpse into the equally compelling world of politics. Shatrughan's reputation as an independent thinker, a non-conformist, and as a person who cares two hoots about stereotypes, is reaffirmed through the lively narration.

One can conclude from the stories of his childhood that the seeds of his unapologetic, brash and rebellious nature were sown very early in his life. The slaps he has received from his mother seem to outnumber those he has had to take from Bollywood heroes and BJP netas. Through it all, he has remained insouciantly himself.

Starting off as a brash filmi villain, Shatrughan introduced a new brand of heroism to the world of cinema through his maverick avatar, portrayed in his trademark style. At a time when his superstar contemporaries were romancing heroines, Shatrughan, with his portrayal as the Bollywood's new baddie, and then as a rough-hewn hero, challenged the industry's norms. Similarly, when the BJP political establishment was falling in line behind the new leadership of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, Shatrughan did not hesitate to speak his own

mind, even if it meant ploughing a lonely furrow.

As someone who is perfectly comfortable in his own skin, Shatrughan Sinha comes across as that rare breed of cinema star and even rarer variety of politician – the wholly authentic human being. Throughout the book, he does not mince his words when discussing his own personal life, baring warts and weaknesses with a great deal of honesty.

The book is an objective, though sympathetic, appraisal of his life with a concluding premise that even those who bear a larger-than-life persona are not free from human flaws and quirks. The book ventures into the grey areas of Shatrughan's life through Bharathi S Pradhan's words, and through the many anecdotes shared by film personalities and by a cross-section of politicians and bureaucrats.

It is said that a man's achievements can be measured by the respect he garners from his fraternity. And it is fascinating how Shatrughan has not only received the respect of his peers but has also inspired the acting styles of formidable superstars like Chiranjeevi and Rajinikanth.

It is quite admirable that Shatrughan's passion for social reform and consciousness of public service inspired him to shun the illusions of comfort and embark on the tumultuous path of politics. His independent discourse and rational thought have guided him in prioritising issues over ideologies.

As a minister in the UPA government, viewing Shatrughan Sinha in the front benches of the BJP Opposition, I was struck by the courtesy with which he treated me and his uncommon graciousness in applauding some of my speeches, a trait all-too-uncommon in our uncivil politics. We started off as political adversaries and became personal friends: that is a tribute to his essential decency and his ability to transcend the artificial boundaries that divide us.

And whenever entreated persistently enough, he could always be relied upon to issue a stirring rendition of his immortal *"Khamosh"*!

May he – through this enjoyable book and through the many deeds left to him to perform in the years ahead – never be silenced.

Shashi Tharoor
New Delhi
November 4, 2015

Author’s Note

I’m not Walter Isaacson, he’s not Steve Jobs, and we’re not in America.

Therefore, unlike Isaacson, I didn’t get *carte blanche* to go to press without the subject, Shatrughan Sinha (SS), scrutinising the final manuscript.

However, I have reason to believe that the reader would be hard put to find a more honest biography in India.

On Thursday, November 27, 2008, SS and I were at 10, Talkatora Road, his official residence in Delhi, watching Mumbai under siege on TV. That was the day we had our first round of talks with publishers in Delhi for an authorised biography on him.

On Saturday, November 14, 2015, SS and I were at his hotel suite in Nagpur, watching Paris under siege on TV. That was the day we put a full stop to *Anything But Khamosh*.

Seven full years, between two terror attacks that coincidentally bore a close resemblance to each other, was what it took to put together *Anything But Khamosh* – a biography that combined the glitz of Hindi cinema with the grit of Indian politics.

Seven years is a long time.

At the outset, Sonakshi was Daddy’s participative little girl who’d curl up on the sofa to listen to her dad and me tape hours of conversation for the book.

Midstream, Sonakshi had grown into a time-strapped celebrity who understandably frowned at intrusion into her space.

In seven years, Luv overcame the heartache of an indifferent debut in Hindi films to bash on regardless. Kussh took his place behind the camera and went from being an eligible bachelor to a newly-wed. The twins were the ones I turned to for information, for photographs, for company.

In seven years, two Lok Sabha elections were fought and won; Delhi and Bihar assembly elections came and went. Equations changed between SS and his party. But interviews conducted over seven years with a rainbow of towering personalities remained relevant; compliments and criticism recorded a while ago did not cross the expiry date. The only exception would perhaps be that when I interviewed senior leaders like Sushma Swaraj, they had told me that they believed SS would never leave their party. Today, it's not about his leaving them but about whether the BJP still wants him on its roster or not. SS' retort to Uma Bharti and those who've talked of his expulsion after the Bihar elections, is a part of Chapter 7: The Rough And Tumble Of A Life In Politics.

We talked for seven years, in the Talkatora Road bungalow in Delhi, over innumerable dinners, events, parties, commercial flights, chartered ones, election rallies in Patna and Delhi, even in the hospital where he recuperated after bypass surgery. He drove with me to meet Nitish Kumar who was in the thick of the Assembly elections in Patna, he took me to meet Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in his hotel suite, he sent me to Lalu Prasad Yadav.

For seven years, we travelled together – Kolkata, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Patna, Indore, Pune, Goa, Nagpur.

But every minute of those seven years was crucial for a book that covers warts and *wah*s. Thank you, Promi for the gracious lunches at home, and for allowing this biography to evolve.

The seven years also helped me understand Promi's importance in the Sinha set-up. A stunning face that lit up luminously, and fashioning herself into a cooking, nurturing family-oriented wife, would be Promi's more obvious attractions. But SS' complete dependence on her was really because Promi imparted the couple tremendous dignity and because she was the most organised, efficient doer SS ever had in his life. She was both a traditional homemaker and the skilled finance manager of the Sinha family.

These were seven fun years. One afternoon at the lunch table, SS asked me if I'd like to meet Nawaz Sharif. Immediately, someone from his team admonished him, "How can you just take someone with you? There's something called protocol." That put SS' back up. "You mean anybody would dare stop me?" he

retorted, and off we went with three others, to meet the Prime Minister of Pakistan. As it turned out, SS was not unaware of protocol. Jose Kutty, his PA, had sought permission for four members of his team to accompany SS.

An afternoon with Lalu Prasad Yadav began lazily with him apparently dozing off while talking to somebody who was meeting him before me. Bishwadeep Akhouri and Bandana Choudhary from SS' Delhi team kept me company while we waited for Lalu to wake up at 4 pm. At first, he thought he had to only give a congratulatory message for the book. But once he knew he had to speak about SS, he was at his irrepressible Bhojpuri best, even giving me the recipe for a Bihari sweet called *belgrami*. He also changed from his banian to a T-shirt to talk to me.

When I wanted to meet Shashi Tharoor for the Foreword, Bandana accompanied me, perhaps to charm the suave Kerala politician into saying, 'Yes'. It worked.

From Pawan Kumar, his secretary of many years and Monish Prem, his brother-in-law, to SK Jha who manned the telephone in Mumbai, to Mishra and Mathur who'd fetch me from Delhi airport, Nathu the Man Friday who'd iron clothes, help me pack, and serve endless cups of green tea whatever the hour, cook Rambharan who rustled up meals, and drivers Ashok and Monty who'd take me to LK Advani, Sushma Swaraj, Yashwant Sinha or CBI Director Anil Sinha, the entire Sinha team played a part in the making of *Anything But Khamosh.*

I didn't always agree with SS, especially with some of his political moves or with his comments on Amitabh Bachchan's performance in *Paa*. But this was his biography, not mine; it had to speak his language, not mine, and it does.

Fortunately, SS himself wanted a credible, readable narrative and not a prolonged fan letter which biographies in India often tend to be. Irrespective of which quarter it came from, he made no move to black out unflattering opinions that most celebrities would never entertain.

After seven years of candour which dominate the pages, SS signed off this unfinished journey with a touch of spirituality. He said, "*Michchhami Dukkadam.* If I have caused offence to anyone in any way, knowingly or unknowingly, in thought, word or deed, I seek *kshamayachna* (forgiveness)."

'Unfinished journey' because *Anything But Khamosh* has a sequel coming up, political all the way. And honest, as always.

It remains an unfinished journey for me too, with SS and with my publisher Ajay Mago. This book went to Om Books International because Ajay and I hit it off as friends from the first time we met. There's something about his warmth that works. The cherry on top was that Chief Editor Dipa Chaudhuri promised to edit this herself. I owe both Ajay and Dipa a gracious 'Thank You' for helping me bring this long assignment to fruition.

Thirty years ago, publishing magnate Nari Hira had asked me which Indian celebrity would permit the most honest, readable biography in the country. I'd answered, Shatrughan Sinha.

Thirty years hence, I'm happy to say that my answer remains unchanged.

Bharathi S Pradhan
Mumbai, 2015

1

Born For Applause

Why fit in when you were born to stand out?

Dr Seuss

He is the fourth and last son of his parents in a compelling real-life replay of a famed Indian epic, making his the only known family in the world to have such a quartet of siblings.

Files at FTII (FII, Film Institute of India, which later became FTII, Film & Television Institute of India) establish that he was the first candidate from Bihar (which then included Jharkhand) to be selected for the acting course and to graduate from its campus in Poona (it was renamed Pune in 1978).

His charismatic stardom has not been replicated or overtaken by any other celebrity from Bihar or Jharkhand in the last forty-five years.

Indeed, apart from him, no actor in any part of the world has ever drawn thunderous applause for playing a villain in film after film. He was also the only screen devil to elicit admiration from both genders and to merit ovation on his mere entry on the screen.

His record-setting achievement of being the first film star from anywhere in India to be sworn in as a full-fledged Cabinet Minister at the Centre (in 2003) cannot ever be beaten. Only after ‘Bihari Babu’ had set the trend did senior actor Sunil Dutt win ministerial approbation from his party (in 2004).

SS is also the only Hindi film star to have been invited to address the UN General Assembly three times on issues that ranged from Palestine to the cooperative movement as the way forward, with the spotlight on Bihar’s Sudha milk cooperative initiative.

~

More than seventy-five years ago, it would have been unimaginable for academician Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Sinha and his wife Shyama Devi Sinha – a childless couple from Patna – to foresee themselves as the parents of four strapping sons. The birth of Ram, Lakhan, Bharat and Shatrughan was, therefore, as magical as having four sons named in a sequence already defined in one of India’s greatest epics – the Ramayan.

As the youngest, Shatrughan Sinha (SS) was his mother’s favourite, and referred to as the *pet pochna* in Hindi. A popular term in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (UP), it was used for the last-born who finally mopped up *(pochna)* the mother’s stomach *(pet)*.

However, calling him Shyama Devi’s *pet pochna* would, strictly speaking, be a deviation from the truth because, unknown even to wife Poonam (Promi to those close to her), a fifth child had been born in the Sinha family.

SS himself recalled a very hazy scene from the past when he was still a small child. Baba, his father, was not at home. As the youngest, SS was his Amma’s little lamb, hanging on to her saree *pallu* (part that hangs loose over the shoulder). His mother was in acute pain and was being taken to hospital, with SS adamantly fighting to go with her. He got his way. Years later, SS learnt that his mother’s distress had been labour pain; she had been taken to hospital for the delivery of a fifth child.

Curious about what was happening to his mother, SS was witness to a very private moment when a nurse came out of Shyama Devi’s room with a bucket and went towards the Ganga, the river that flowed beside the small hospital in Patna. The child followed the nurse and saw her throw something into the river three or four times. After he grew up, SS understood that what he’d watched was the nurse getting rid of his mother’s stillborn baby. Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Sinha

and Shyama Devi Sinha's fifth child didn't survive.

Suspending scientific questioning, one must enter the mind of the staunchly faithful to accept why the fifth died before being born.

SS' parents had been childless when they heard about the miracles wrought at the Ram Rama Pati Bank, a temple in Benares. BP Sinha may have been a man of science who was educated in America but when it came to faith, he followed his wife. The couple made a trip to Benares where the temple still exists. In fact, decades later, film star Shatrughan Sinha escorted his mother through the narrow, winding lanes of the small town in UP to reach Ram Rama Pati Bank, driven by the curiosity to see where their family Ramayan had begun.

It was a strong belief then (and now) that the childless who abided by the traditions of Ram Rama Pati Bank would have their prayers granted. A set of rules had to be religiously followed which included writing the name of Lord Ram *sava lakh* (1,25,000) times and depositing it at the Bank. One also had to live on brahminical *satvik khaana* for one year, which meant abstinence from non-vegetarian and aphrodisiacal food like garlic and onion.

Anybody with an intense, unfulfilled desire could go to Ram Rama Pati Bank and put in an *arzi* (request). The belief was that an *arzi* for a child would be granted a maximum of four times.

SS made the politically astute observation, "I personally think a daughter is the most beautiful, most desirable member of a family. But those days, everybody yearned to have sons. This may have sprung from the human need to have your offspring take forward the name of the family. Whatever the reason, my parents would religiously give up non-vegetarian food, go to Ram Rama Pati Bank and register their *arzi*. Once the *arzi* came through, you had to continue with the discipline of fasting."

Shyama Devi was the perfect traditional housewife, and Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Sinha was the founder of Government College of Health and Physical Education in Patna. After retiring as Deputy Director of Education, he went to Amravati as Principal of Laxmibai College. While BP Sinha pursued his interest in academics, Shyama Devi was religious, given to performing elaborate *puja*s (rituals).

When they were blessed with four sons, they were inspired to name them in the sequence of King Dashrath's sons in the Ramayan. Therefore, they confidently named them Ram, Lakhan, Bharat and Shatrughan – in that order. They stuck to the Ramayan even though, according to a study of the fourth

child's *rashi* (zodiac sign according to Hindu belief), his name should have been Khemraj. Undeterred, they named him Shatrughan with the blessings of the deities at Ram Rama Pati Bank. But crossing over from need to greed, the much-chuffed Sinha parents aspired for a fifth son. When it didn't survive, the family had to accept that the temple processed and permitted only four. Thus, Shatrughan remained the youngest Sinha sibling.

The resemblance to the epic, however, began and ended with their names. Ram was the hero of the Ramayan but in the Sinhas' version, it was Shatrughan who ran away with fame unimaginable. BP Sinha's fourth-born was also Patna's *enfant terrible.*

"While the three of us followed my father's directions most times, Sonu never did," brother Lakhan Sinha, older than SS by four years, didn't mince his words when he spoke of his celebrity sibling. Sonu was the pet name the actor later acquired from a legion of female admirers, and was soon picked up and used by those close to him.

His date of birth was a grey area. His passport declared it as July 15, 1946, a date duly followed by the Internet. However, he has been known to celebrate his birthday on December 9, with 1945 and 1947 quoted by those close to him as his birth years. SS himself chose to let the ambiguity linger as he guffawed, "A beautiful girl once asked me my age and I told her in all honesty, let me know how old you'd like me to be and I'll oblige."

"He was very naughty," remarked indulgent cousin Annapurna didi, nine years older than SS. A Master's in Labour & Social Welfare, she was closer to him than a real sibling would have been. "During a Q & A based on a mythological story in his Hindi class, the students were asked, '*Janak ka dhanush kisne toda* (Who broke Janak's bow)?' When it was his turn to answer, Sonu dramatically replied, '*Humne nahin toda, humne nahin* (I didn't break it, I didn't).' It was his way of entertaining the whole class."

Brashness and bravado combined with a singular lack of inhibition made the youngest Sinha a natural for the limelight. His sparkling, attention-loving personality, his exceptional mimicry skills and his flair for drawing a hearty chuckle, emerged so early in life that SS was always the neighbourhood magnet that drew everybody to him.

One of SS' earliest memories went back to the time he was in Std VI. His fearlessness blended with spotlight-seeking precociousness, was at the fore at Patna Collegiate Multi-Purpose Higher Secondary School (simplified as Patna

Collegiate). One day, the cheeky Std VI student made his way to his brother, Ram Sinha's Std XI classroom, where he stood on the teacher's dais, jumped, danced, sang, mimicked everybody in sight and thoroughly entertained his seniors until the teacher walked in. If SS was let off without punishment that day, it was solely because he was the younger brother of a bright and definitely more sober Std XI student.

It was apparent very early in life that this Sinha was born for a life vastly different from the others in his family. Test-tubes and theorems had no place in his young heart; his trade would have more to do with applause and audiences.

He displayed his inclinations once again on an evening when a cultural function was held in the grounds behind the school and the lights suddenly failed. "Bihar has always been infamous for its power failure, whether it's electricity or ministerial power," the actor-politician wisecracked. "As children, we would be thrilled with a power failure. We got a chance to put away our books and run out of the house."

But when the power failed at the function that evening, there was chaos and it seemed as if an unruly stampede would soon break out. SS did not remember how but in that mêlée, he managed to slip through, reach the stage and find a mike (one phase was working). In the darkness, the nine or ten-year-old boy sang, danced, imitated well-known *neta*s, *abhineta*s (political leaders, actors) and school teachers, and kept the audience regaled for 45 minutes until the lights came on. The whole crowd laughed, whistled and was in raptures till the electricity was restored and they found that it was a plump little schoolboy who'd kept them thus enthralled.

Being his mother's pet, SS was an overfed child, much-inclined to be podgy. But this fat little boy had averted a potential stampede with his natural gift for holding a crowd spellbound. When the lights came on, he awoke from the magic of the moment, blushed self-consciously and slipped away. But he'd got a taste of audience admiration and it became a lifelong addiction.

Another incident further demonstrated his lack of reserve before an audience. Annapurna and her husband, BC Sinha, had invited SS to stay with them in Rajgir. One day, they took him to an intellectual meeting of important personalities, including the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University, a very distinguished citizen. By this time, SS had picked up quite a bit of Bengali from some of his childhood friends and could follow the speeches. He heard the VC extol the virtues of the ancient Nalanda University, its renowned discipline, its

academics and its many facilities. It was a serious lecture with many people listening in rapt attention when all of a sudden, this rotund little boy got up and, unmindful of the hundreds sitting around him, asked with confident naïveté, “At Nalanda, what were the facilities for people to go to the toilet?” Annapurna and BC Sinha were flabbergasted; the VC started fumbling and there was an uproar.

“It’s still an obsession with him,” laughed wife Poonam. “Whenever my husband has to go anywhere, he first checks out what the restroom facilities are!”

The incident in Rajgir showed that there was a sharp little mind ticking behind that naughty exterior. He wanted an answer to a very basic human need and had the guts to get up and ask his question, oblivious of the senior, intellectual audience around him.

It was also proof that this was a boy whose oxygen was a large, appreciative audience. He’d face them without a squirm, indeed welcome them and bask in the ensuing attention.

But his somewhat staid, scientifically and academically-inclined family didn’t comprehend SS’ natural aptitude for the spotlight. He himself was too young to figure out which way to head. All he knew with growing certainty was that he dreaded the sciences – Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry were alien tongues that the rest of the family spoke with fluency while he comprehended only the language of entertainment.

His father had earned his impressive degrees from America way back in the 1950s; it was an education that few dared aspire for and even fewer achieved in India then. SS was still a child when his father left *‘paani ke jahaaz mein’* (by ship) for America where he graduated from Kansas and Pennsylvania State Universities. SS was a huge disappointment for the scholarly parent but he was extremely close to his mother, perhaps the natural ties of the last-born who got all her affection and protection. SS always harboured the feeling that his father’s favourite was Ram, the eldest son, maybe because according to convention, he would be the one to take the family name forward.

The Sinha residence in Patna was named Bhuvaneshwar Niwas, after his father. Years later, SS would thunder in his speeches about feeling a particular closeness with Odisha, especially the city of Bhuvaneshwar (Bhubaneshwar), because his father’s name was Bhuvaneshwar and his house in Patna was called Bhuvaneshwar Niwas. It was the sort of rhetoric that would unfailingly send the audience at his political rallies in Odisha into raptures.

All through SS' childhood, Amma was his best friend. He would curl up beside her in the afternoons and press her feet or pull out grey hair from her head. But the mischievous lad also struck a deal with her that she would pay him one paisa for each grey hair. Sometimes, he'd purposely miscount and inveigle a little extra out of her.

A lot of Amma's emotional and not entirely practical nature rubbed off on her favourite offspring, and Annapurna was often the recipient of SS' emotional largesse.

"A magazine had stated that if he was so close to a cousin, imagine how he would have been with a real sister," Annapurna said, touched by childhood remembrances. "I was an only child, so all my affection was heaped on him. Despite a big age difference between Sonu and me, we would fight like kids. When I'd stop talking to him, he would complain to his mother, '*Dekho, moti baat nahin kar rahi hai* (Fatso is not talking to me).' His mother would answer in Bhojpuri, '*Ley ho, tum log kahe aapas mein ladat ho* (Why do both of you keep fighting with each other)?'"

His early childhood, before the pressure of studies built up, was serene and secure. It was during this time that he discovered the first passion of his life – Hindi cinema. He was so mesmerised that he'd be anxious and restless until he could catch the new film in town. His was the desperation of a junkie who couldn't wait for his next fix.

SS had an unexpected ally in one of his brothers. Unlike Ram and Bharat who were academically inclined and, like their father, largely disinclined towards films, Lakhan had a predilection for movies and fanned his youngest sibling's obsession with Hindi cinema.

"As children, you naturally tend to shield the youngest from your parents," shrugged Lakhan in his defence as he traced SS' unpermitted forays into the world that held him in a trance. "Sonu used to go for late night shows, definitely not permitted by Baba. We would wait for him to return and quietly open the door for him."

He admitted, "Watching films was a trait he picked up from me. I was such a buff, I would regularly buy *Screen* and *Filmfare*. I must've bought *Screen* for 15 to 20 years from the railway platform where it would be available a few hours before the newsstands in the city, and Sonu would eagerly take it from me."

Parental disapproval of the film industry was no deterrent for the besotted young SS. "I've run even barefoot to the theatre just to catch a movie. I've gone

in the peak heat, even when there was a *loo* (hot winds that sweep across North India in summer) at 48 and 49° Celsius to see a film," recalled SS. "If I had to wait for a week to see *Mughal-e-Azam*, I would be so *bechain* (restless) that I couldn't eat or drink until I saw the film. Once, there was such a scramble for tickets that a lovely sharkskin bush shirt that my father had bought me, got torn in the mêlée. But for me, getting that one-and-a-half rupee movie ticket was of paramount importance. I must have seen *Mughal-e-Azam* thirty or forty times – whenever I got a chance to see it. I just fell in love with the film."

Another film fascinated him so much that though he remembers neither the title nor the lead actors, a shot from it remained deeply entrenched in his memory. "There was a close-up of Jairaj or some other actor where he just raised an eyebrow. It startled me and stayed with me. I wondered, 'How did that eyebrow go up and why?' I was only a child then but it got stuck in my mind."

Those days, Hindi movie addicts would belong to either the Dilip Kumar group or the Raj Kapoor camp. SS gravitated towards Raj Kapoor, although they had little in common except that they were both Sagittarians born in the month of December. For that matter, Dilip Kumar was also a December-born Sagittarian but it was RK who drew SS to the screen, as the first film that got lodged in his juvenile memory was *Shree 420*. The schoolboy sat agape in the theatre as the song "Mera Joota Hai Japani" unspooled and he was awestruck by the scene where Raj Kapoor spots a snake and comically runs away at high speed. He had no clue that a high-speed camera had done the trick. "I was totally infatuated," said SS. "In fact, my second was also a Raj Kapoor film."

It was *Shree 420* once more. His father had arranged to send all the sons in the car with an orderly to Ashok theatre to watch Dev Anand's *Funtoosh*. But SS slipped out with the orderly and went to Pearl, the neighbouring theatre, to watch Raj Kapoor all over again. His brothers saw *Funtoosh* comfortably seated in the second last row. Since SS had to spring for the orderly's ticket too, he sat in the lowest class near the screen which cost 6 annas (before 1957, 16 annas made a rupee). To his everlasting regret, SS never did get around to seeing *Funtoosh.*

Once SS realised that audience admiration gave him an adrenaline rush, his mimicry skills and fondness for pranks drew people to him. To add to it was "a face that resembles a battlefield" as he put it, with four distinguishing scars.

Later in life, the scars were termed "sexy" and women swooned over the signs of masculinity that he sported so unabashedly on his face. But the truth was, not a single scar was earned for a display of bravado.

“Scar No 1 was sustained when I was riding a tricycle that wasn’t even mine – it was my brother’s. To this day, I remember wistfully that I didn’t ever have a tricycle of my own. The maid had gone to check if the milk was boiling and in that time, I fell off and got Scar No 1 on my forehead.”

Scar No 2 appeared because of childish jealousy. “My father had bought a very big tiger made of *chini mitti* (porcelain), which used to hang on the wall of our small drawing room. I couldn’t understand why the tiger drew so much admiration and attention from everybody, and the jealousy factor kicked in. One afternoon, I prised the tiger out with a stick and it came crashing down on my head. That gave me Scar No 2, again on my forehead.”

The third scar was imprinted near his ear (covered by his hair, so not visible) when a cat clawed him so viciously that when he was rushed to the doctor in a rickshaw, the whole seat was covered with blood. The bleeding eventually stopped; the scar stayed.

Once again, a childhood antic delivered the fourth scar on his face near the lip. His father was in America and his maternal uncle was preparing to go there. His mother and aunt were busy when SS took a shaving blade that was sharp on both sides and proceeded to shave his tiny female cousin. She got a cut and started crying after which SS told her, “I’ll show you how to handle it,” and began to shave his own face. The blade went so deep that it got stuck in his skin and he started bleeding. Plastic surgery was relatively unknown those days, so the scars remained. But decades later, a few years before she passed away, his aunt told SS that the whole household had been in such a tizzy over his uncle’s trip that they had quickly resorted to a home remedy – *tulsi ka patta* (basil leaves) and ash were pressed against his cheek to stop the bleeding.

All through his childhood, the natural inclination for drama blended well with his repertoire of pranks. Once, when he reached home late and knew he would be pulled up by his disciplinarian father, he feigned unconsciousness. “Initially, Baba dismissed it as dramatics,” he chuckled, “but I carried the act so well that everyone was taken in. It was only when they talked of calling the doctor which meant injections that I miraculously regained consciousness. The result was that there was all-round amusement at my act and by then, my father’s anger had also subsided. My tactic of buying time paid off that day.

“Another time, after a fight with one of my brothers, I pretended to have lost my voice. I acted completely dumb. There was a suspicion that I was putting on an act – someone even put a finger in my mouth to make me speak – but my

mother was soon convinced and a lot of theatrics followed. It was only when the *haahaakaar* (excitement) got out of hand that I admitted I was playing a prank on everybody."

Father BP Sinha was the no-nonsense academic. Mother Shyama Devi was the putty in SS' young hands, although on occasion, she would also whack him. "But out of all four brothers, nobody got a beating from my father's stick except me," SS almost boasted. "It was because of a very strong streak of stubbornness – I get a glimpse of that streak in Sonakshi these days," he added with a touch of concern.

To make up for getting the rough end of BP Sinha's stick, both Amma and Annapurna enveloped him with their warmth. "Chacha used up the full quota of punishment, so there was no question of any of us punishing or scolding Sonu as well," explained Annapurna. "I've only seen Chachi twist his ear on occasion. She adored him. Those days, men managed all the finances. Still, if Sonu wanted to eat something like say, mutton, Chachi would somehow manage to get it from a hotel and feed him what he wanted."

A foodie he was, and a foodie he remained. Mahmood Alam, a close friend who grew up with him in the same locality of Kadam Kuan, remembered with a smile, "Long before Shatrughan became a minister, he appointed me his Food Minister. He liked eating a variety of birds like *bageri, chaha, murga,* which would be cooked at our place. Even after we grew up, whenever he came to Patna, we would make his favourite non-vegetarian dishes and leave them with Amma who would serve them to him. If he had a special guest, like Sunil Duttji, he would request me to get food made at our place. There's a photograph of Sunil Dutt and Shatrughan in the Kadam Kuan house, sitting at the same table and eating the food that had been made and sent to him from our place."

The one unforgettable time SS got a taste of his father's stick also had its source in his fondness for food, accompanied by juvenile pig-headedness. "I used to love my mother's *laddoo*s (Indian sweet) and one day I took a stand that since I was a Number 9 (born on December 9), I would eat nine *laddoo*s and not one less. My mother tried to get me to eat one after which she would decide about giving me more but I wouldn't budge. It had to be nine or none. By evening, my father who was then Deputy Director of Education, returned in his Morris Minor and my mother who was at the end of her tether, told him about my stubborn stand. He was so angered that he decided to give me nine strokes of his stick instead. I cried a lot. I was the youngest and here I was, getting a

beating from my father. I was very hurt and angry. I think I cried myself to sleep that night. But when I woke up, I found my whole body oily. My mother had come in some time during the night and massaged my body with oil. I'd slept so soundly after the thrashing that I wasn't even aware of her motherly kindness."

BP Sinha's formidable demeanour was feared by one and all. "His father was so strict with timings that he would go to sleep at 9 pm and after that no lights were allowed to be switched on, no water tap to be opened, no noise at all," recounted Annapurna. "Sonu was, of course, the first to break all the house rules. He would return late, put his hand in through the window and open the latch from outside while my uncle was fast asleep.

"Everybody was scared to go against his father, *zaban kholna to door ki baat thi* (forget about opening your mouth in front of him)."

Everybody – except one.

"Sonu once went off somewhere without telling anyone," Annapurna laughed softly. "When he returned and was questioned, he replied that he had informed his mother. His father said, 'Today you tell your mother and go out, tomorrow you'll say you informed the maid…' Sonu instantly shot back, '*Kya dono mein antar nahin hai?* Isn't there a difference between Amma and the maid?' Sonu was both sharp and unafraid to counter anybody." It's a trait that never deserted him – film world colleagues and politicians alike have witnessed it time and again, much to their consternation.

To offset the disciplinarian parent, Shyama Devi was the quintessential mother. SS articulated his closeness to Amma: "I liked going out with her. It's a dying culture with today's children but I enjoyed going out with my father too, sitting with him, listening to him, meeting his guests. These were strong emotional ties which I don't see in children today. If the car wasn't available, I'd happily go in a rickshaw with my mother. I was Amma's *chhutka bauwa* (little darling)." After Amma, only sister Annapurna and wife Poonam have sometimes used *bauwa* as an endearment for him.

In his father's presence, SS dared not voice his concerns about pursuing Science as his main subject but he would even practise his singing and acting in front of Amma.

"He was a first-rate comedian," said businessman and BJP party man Pravin Kumar Sinha, one of SS' oldest friends. With just a year's difference between them, SS and Pravin became friends in 1953 when they studied together in Ganesh Pathshala. "Those days, there was an extremely popular play called

Loha Singh on radio, written and conceived by Prof Rameshwar Singh Kashyap from Patna University. Based essentially on three characters with a rural background and folk songs, Loha Singh stood against social evils but in a comical way. It was a masterpiece on radio and Shatrughan used to do a perfect enactment of Loha Singh."

His acting skills spilled into his real life when he would visit Patna Medical College Hospital, wear a white coat and stethoscope, check out the patient's pulse and recommend orange juice very gravely.

The prankster also had his own logic to level the field on every front. Retired banker Hiraji (full name: Birendra Mohan Sahay) who now runs a charitable eye hospital for the underprivileged in Patna, recalled that even if SS went into a shop, bought four pieces of *mithai* (sweets) and gave two to his friend, "He'd take a small bit out of my share saying, 'Since the money was mine, how can it be completely equal? I must get just a little bit more.'"

"He was also," Hiraji added wryly, "very bright at getting the better of his friends." He and SS went to different colleges but went together on a cycle for the NCC parade. Hiraji reminisced, "Shatrughan would tell me to pedal both of us all the way saying, 'I'm providing the cycle, so you do the pedalling. Otherwise, you can go on foot.'" The canny traits of a politician were evident rather early.

The bicycle SS rode was his father's old one made by a company called Humbug. It was an ancient, heavy cycle and Shatru hated it. But he had to ride the Humbug or nothing at all.

Patna businessman Pradeep Gupta who wears a moustache *à la* Shatrughan and has often been mistaken for a Sinha family member, was another buddy from the cheeky days of footloose mischief.

"In college, we were famous as the happy-go-lucky team. We often went to the Medical College to rag freshers. Shatrughan was tall, so he would pose as a senior. We ourselves were in Pre-University and sometimes the boys we were ragging would turn out to be BSc and MSc students. They were *dhoti-kurta-teeka* (rurally dressed) type of students from the village and we couldn't make out that they were our seniors. Umesh Panjiar, now a Senior IAS officer and Head of the Electricity Board, was one such person whom we ragged and he turned out to be our senior!

"There used to be the daughter of a doctor who would drive her own car to college. In the 1960s, a girl driving a car was a rare and novel sight in Patna.

Shatrughan would come to my house and we would go doubles on the cycle to college. We would purposely drive very slowly before her car and not let her overtake us.

"One day, it was Saraswati Puja, and she was in a yellow saree. We started singing, 'Hey Ganga Maiya, Tori Piyuri Chadhayi…' a popular song those days from the Bhojpuri film *Ganga Maiya Tori Piyuri*… *Piyuri* was a yellow saree in Bhojpuri."

SS' friends remembered the night they were returning after watching a circus at nearby Harding Park. The rickshawala mistook the revellers for outsiders, decided on a circuitous route through lanes and bylanes, and took over an hour to reach Kadam Kuan. The young lads enjoyed the ride without a word and when they finally reached, SS paid the rickshawala four measly annas. "Only four annas?" gawked the driver. "Didn't you see that it took me one-and-a-half hours to bring you here?" His eyes twinkling with mischief, SS asked him, "How many years have you been in Patna?" The rickshawala said, "*Ho gaya paanch saal*, five years." SS laughed, "*Aur hamara ho gaya unnees saal* (And we've been around for nineteen years). We know Patna inside out but we enjoyed your free ride all around the city. Thank you." The friends laughed heartily over having put one over the wily rickshawala.

Baba who dispensed discipline, Amma who fed, sometimes overfed and shielded him, brothers who indulged and covered up for him, friends, plenty of them all the time around him, outings with parents, a bright, inquisitive mind and much mischief, conclusively indicated that SS had a warm and wonderful childhood.

The whacks and the *wah*s, the praise and the punishments all came along as a wholesome package.

Late Madhava Jee Prasad, also a childhood friend who shared *alu-padval* (potatoes-snake gourd), *bhujia ka nashta* (a Bihari snack) and mangoes with SS in their growing years, had laughed and recalled, "Shatrughan had to pay so many fines in college that he finally said to the Principal, '*Hamari fine se Science College ki tijori bhar gayi hai* (The college coffers are overflowing with my fines).'"

His 'fine' situation left him with barely two-and-a-half to three rupees as pocket money every month. He spent it all on watching films. "Unbelievably," SS recalled, "I still managed to save a bit here and there and gave Ram bhaiya a loan of Rs 100 and another brother some Rs 92. I never got either loan back!"

He also remembered that he himself had wheedled five rupees out of a teacher called CD Sahay, for a movie ticket. But it was another detail that SS' photographic memory volunteered. "CD Sahay retired a few years ago as Chief of RAW," he supplied, displaying his lifelong fascination for policeman and bureaucrats which helped him keep tabs on who had headed in which direction.

"We had another teacher named TP Sinha," he produced another name that had joined the IPS. "He was Ram bhaiya's best friend. Before he left for America, my brother had requested him to coach me in Physics which he did every day of the week including Sundays, without charging me for it."

Besides the free daily tuitions, TP Sinha had also given in to SS' pleading, and handed him approximately ten likely questions before his Physics exam. But an indifferent SS who didn't want to study for an exam, did nothing with them. "Lo and behold, when I went to the exam hall, six out of the ten questions were the ones my Sir had given me. And I had not bothered to prepare for it."

What he did do was to follow TP Sinha's career with the pride of a Bihari. "He was the first Director General of Police, Bihar and also the first DG Police of Jharkhand after the State was carved out. He was the only IPS officer to have served both States as DGP. He was also the first Special Advisor to the Governor and was very active even after retirement."

Sometimes, memories also hurt.

"We had a school principal called Shatrughan Prasad Singh and another called Paras Nath Sinha," he recollected and winced. "Due to my constant mischief, one day, one of them called me in and hit me on my knuckles with the duster. More than the physical beating, I was hurt emotionally and tears sprang to my eyes. But I never told anybody about it. It's the first time in my life that I'm disclosing the fact that I got beaten on the knuckles by the Principal."

It didn't, however, help to reform the errant student. "My antics went on unlimited," he continued, accepting that he took his studies so casually that he approached even his board exams (in the final year of school) with a shrug and a swagger. "When I'd appear for an exam, the students would be much amused because I'd always be up to something that would make them laugh."

There was such disregard for the importance of a board exam that he didn't even bother to study his time table. One day, he lazed around at home, assuring his mother that he did not have an exam that day. The next day, when he strolled into the exam hall, he realised that he had missed the Maths exam the day before. There was hell to pay at home for that negligence.

Annapurna was witness to it. “I had come home on the day they found out that he hadn’t sat for his Maths exam and he got such a thrashing from his father! Despite all the bravado, Sonu was scared of his father. That’s why he sat for the re-exam after losing a year. If Chacha hadn’t been there, he wouldn’t have sat for it the next time either.”

One could completely empathise with his father’s exasperation because he recognised the fact that his last born son was not low on IQ. In every sphere other than studies, SS sparkled and showed that he was intelligent and immensely gifted. Laboratory tests may have baffled him but extreme curiosity, the guts to experiment and the fascination with movies continued unabated. He couldn’t remember a line from his textbooks but reams of dialogues from favourite films could be recalled without error. Even before he got out of school, SS could mimic forty-five different voices to perfection. He would brandish a sword and perform entire scenes from *Mughal-e-Azam,* alternating between Prithviraj Kapoor’s heavy baritone and Dilip Kumar’s relatively softer voice, making his audience laugh and cry with him. He enacted complete scenes from *Devdas*, he copied Shammi Kapoor, he aped the Principal and the Vice-Principal.

“Observation was one of my keen qualities,” he recorded. The sharp eye for detail and the jumbo memory for rattling off pages and pages of lines were early signs of where he was heading. “People in the film industry often wondered how I could easily memorise a number of pages of dialogue but it probably had its beginnings in my school days when verbose dialogues would roll off my tongue with ease. To this day, it’s not difficult for me to do all those scenes in different voices.”

It would be relevant to mention that every casual conversation with SS was like an unrehearsed performance. Every time he narrated an incident, he automatically switched over to the voice of the person he was talking about, moving effortlessly from Dilip Kumar’s thin-nasal voice to Prithiviraj’s more gravelly one.

Unfailingly entertaining but also an embarrassment, especially for his father, SS’ unacceptable social behaviour continued and as he grew older, girls began to figure in his escapades. Teasing the local girls appeared on the agenda although he claimed, “It was always with a sense of humour. Never did I do or say anything vulgar. Perhaps that’s why many of the girls grew fond of me. If they had their way, I’d have been married twenty-five times over in my college days itself. But by the time a girl started getting close, my attention would have

shifted elsewhere." This trait too, accompanied him down the years, leaving Poonam piqued all through their marriage.

Female attention at different stages of his life obviously meant a lot to SS because it figured intermittently in his conversation, almost like an achievement that needed to be chronicled. He might've perished as the roadside Romeo of Patna if failure in the Sciences, and FTII beckoning him at the right time, had not steered him towards a more fortuitous future.

Meanwhile, his aversion for studies remained unchanged. It included even cheating in Std X when he copied every calculation and every equation from close friend Pravin Sinha's Maths answer sheet, and swaggered home to announce that this time he had aced it. If not 100%, he would get at least 90%. But when the results came out, he was stunned to find that the school had taken away his 90% boast – he got only 10%.

"I was disgusted with myself," grimaced SS. "Even after cheating, if I could get only 10%, I was most certainly doing something unsuitable for me, it was being forced upon me. I decided then that Science was not going to be my choice but there was no way I could convey this to my father. Even my mother was scared to tell him. Times really were different."

It is a distinct possibility that SS' later unpopularity with the Principal of Patna Science College and his growing defiance of rules had plenty to do with his dismay at finding himself in a place that was at such odds with what he was cut out for.

His father who was determined to make a doctor out of this son too, sent the errant SS after he had passed out of school, to stay with his brother, Jagdishwari Prasad Sinha who was Deputy Superintendent of Police at Sitamarhi, and his daughter Annapurna. Incidentally, Annapurna was so close to SS that it was only in Std X that he learnt she was a cousin and not his real sister. "I cried a lot that day," SS sniffed, baring an emotional side to him.

It was perhaps his uncle's personality that set off a lifelong respect in SS for the police force. Neeraj Kumar, Former Commissioner of Police, Delhi, and currently head of the anti-corruption cell of BCCI, who called the actor his Mama (maternal uncle), traced the source of SS' admiration for the men in uniform. "Police officer JP Sinhasaab was referred to and feared as *Kadey Khan* (a strict, tough man), a terror all over Bihar. He was always posted to a problem area and he would manage to control the crime rate there. Impressed by him, Mama (SS) became fascinated with the police."

Perhaps BP Sinha had dreams of his policeman-brother taming SS too, when he packed him off to his house in Sitamarhi. SS was sent to Goenka College in Sitamarhi with the hope that in the new atmosphere, he would undergo a miraculous transformation. But that was a pipe dream as the collegian didn't even bother to check out what his syllabus was all about. In Sitamarhi too, he came up with his own forms of rebellion. He once took out a two-rupee pen and swished it around like a knife. The teacher thought he'd really carried a knife into college. That and his unchecked antics with girls on the campus ensured that he was soon out of that college too.

He left Sitamarhi and entered Patna Science College, considered one of the best colleges of North India to this day.

He stepped into the best educational institution in the city on his own merit but his attendance was more regularly registered in the local movie hall where he still managed to catch every film that was released in Patna.

And his one true love affair with Raj Kapoor continued without a dip in the intensity. He described, unabashedly, "I was, I am and I am sure I will forever remain Raj Kapoor's biggest admirer, although as people, we had very little in common. Raj Kapoor was *gore-chittay* (fair-complexioned and handsome), his antics were totally different. Most actors idolise Dilip Kumar. I too call Dilipsaab an institution; I am immensely fond of him. But Raj Kapoor was my everlasting love. Blue eyes and charming, I was honoured that one day I could work with him, that too in my secretary Pawan Kumar's production, *Khan Dost* (1976). It was made by my own people under the Ramayan Chitra banner."

Raj Kapoor converted the clueless boy from Patna into an aspirant who began to crave for a place in the same industry as his idol. In SS' words, "After seeing *Shree 420*, something happened to me. Gradually, I began to see other people's films too. But I was so intensely absorbed with Raj Kapoor that I began to look up to even those who were close to him – Shankar-Jaikishan, Hasrat Jaipuri, Shailendra, Mukesh. Mukesh became my favourite singer; I began to sing like him too."

Mukesh's son, Nitin nostalgically said, "One of Shatruji's earliest hit songs was sung by my father. That evergreen number, 'Kayi Sadiyon Se, Kayi Janmon Se…' which was picturised on Shatruji in *Milaap* was sung by Mukeshji."

SS was fortunate because one day, he would rub shoulders with all the RK names he so revered, including "Nargis didi" to whom he wrote his life's only fan letter. She didn't reply to it but years later, when he became a film star, he

told her that she could now reply to him in person. She did, by visiting Poonam and him at home, along with her husband Sunil Dutt. But SS' fan letter had not gone to Mrs Dutt, it had gone to Nargis, the RK heroine.

"No child at that age would've remembered the name Allauddin Khan who was RK's sound recordist," went on SS. "But I knew even all his technicians by name. I knew cinematographer Radhu Karmarkar, I knew his boys, Revati and Gopal. All the names that featured in the title credits became flesh-and-blood people for me."

That pitch of adulation also had its inevitable downside. SS was forthright when he admitted that he was so enamoured by Raj Kapoor that he began to emulate everything about him. It included a long association with cigarettes.

"I have to make the point here that celebrities are role models and must watch out for their behaviour in public life," he admonished those who take their social status lightly. "I was so thoroughly influenced by Raj Kapoor that I started smoking too. Watching him hold a 555 cigarette between two fingers was so fascinating, I loved it!"

With the wisdom of experience, he lectured, "One message I would like to send far and wide through these pages is that celebrities have no idea just how much of an influence they have on masses. Millions of fans feel they've inched closer to their favourite idols by copying their antics and habits. Every celebrity should realise and accept the impact he has on his fans.

"The habit of smoking that I picked up in school, continued through college, followed me to FTII and came with me to the film industry. It took me years to realise that smoking was not good for my health, or for my family, for the environment or for society. It required great will power before I could finally kick the butt. But at the end, I not only quit smoking without any substitute, I also began to do anti-tobacco programmes and campaigns, exhorting the next generation to give it up because the health of the nation is the wealth of the nation. The campaign got an impetus when I became the Health Minister of India."

Given his admiration for all things RK, when SS watched *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai*, he was bowled over by Pran's turn as Raka the dacoit. His mannerisms and the wig so fascinated the impressionable young boy that he even started imitating Pran's walk, talk and speech in his everyday life. He began to sport the same hairstyle as Raka and spewed all his lines, which he naturally knew by heart, in front of the mirror.

Even today, Pran's lines, "*Ye policewala maar dalega...ye policewala hai, sardar* (He'll kill all of us, boss...he's a cop)" roll off Sinha's tongue, instinctively taking on the same voice and pitch as the late villain. "*Buddhe ka koyi dar nahin, khatka toh ladki ka hai ki kahin woh machal na jaye...* (The old man doesn't pose a danger; I'm worried that the girl shouldn't create a problem)." He was Raka every day and one day when he was practising his dialogues, his father caught him, saw his weird hairstyle and asked him if he wanted a sound thrashing. That was the end of Raka in Patna.

"But the passion for acting had seeped deep into me though I didn't know where this obsession was leading me."

He remained clueless about where life was taking him until his friend Arvind from Patna who was doing the Cinematography course at FTII told him that the Institute had an acting course too, and steered him towards it. Brother Lakhan actively encouraged the move.

Since Lakhan himself was inexorably drawn to cinema, he would visit Bombay (as it was called until 1995) and indulge in typical fan-like pursuits – visiting a film studio to watch a shoot or getting himself photographed with stars like Shashi Kapoor and Asha Parekh. Details of these encounters would be eagerly awaited by SS who'd add the photographs to his portfolio of film memorabilia.

"Sonu had the confidence that he would make it as an actor. I also thought he would succeed which was why I backed him so much," Lakhan explained.

SS had a flair for debating as well. In school, when the lead speaker fell ill before an inter-school competition, SS had stepped in at the last minute and spoken impressively on 'India is the land of fairy tales without fairies'. SS' third brother, Dr Bharat Sinha MBBS, MD, a leading family physician in the UK for over forty years, proudly chipped in, "He was a topper in debating in the whole of Bihar State. In hindsight, you can see that he had a talent for oratory and logic right then. Luckily, he moved in the right direction."

"Destiny took me to FTII, and through it, I got my entry into the film industry," SS recorded with satisfaction. "Luck is the most important factor for this kind of stardom and success," he added. "Destiny and *junoon* – unbridled passion – are the two major factors for my stardom." (For a very long time, he used to pronounce it as 'is'tardom, a throwback to his Bihari roots.)

Picking up important points from the clueless moments of his own life, SS outlined a must-do blueprint for every youngster. The first was self-assessment.

“I was never too good at studies. I was just about okay in sports. I played a bit of table tennis and cricket but I was a fat child. What ultimately took me far was my passion for art and culture. It made me Shatrughan Sinha.

“Passion for what you want to do in life can take you very far. But as I have often said, the *junoon* has to be matched by another big factor – luck. And that, unfortunately, is not in our hands.”

He expanded on the thought: “God has been extremely kind to me. However,” he said with uncharacteristic humility, “I don’t claim to be the most talented one. There must be lakhs of people more talented than me on the streets of Patna, Gaya, Darbanga, Ranchi or anywhere. There’s no explanation for why one person makes it so big in life. It’s like a roulette table where you play No 22 and the ball falls on that number.”

He asserted that when the ball fell on your chosen number, “Firstly, it doesn’t make you great or superior in any way. Secondly, you can’t question why it didn’t fall on No 21 or 23, because there is no logical explanation for luck. *Mere naam ka sikka nikal gaya aur chal gaya* (Destiny picked my name, and it worked). There are many talented boys. Manoj Bajpayee is very good, Shekhar Suman is talented. They’re so deserving that they might make it very big in future. Unfortunately, despite their capabilities, efforts and intentions, they have so far not succeeded in terms of becoming huge movie stars. With due respect, there was Ramayan Tiwari who played an assistant to Pran in *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai* or, years ago there was Bhagwan Sinha who did small roles as a villain in Dev Anand films. They were good, talented people but none of them achieved stardom. I met Mr Tiwari but I never got to meet Mr Bhagwan Sinha. They were never really major forces to reckon with in Hindi films but for us back in Patna, their names inspired awe. I couldn’t dream of even reaching where they had, me with a face full of scars.”

When SS went on about the undreamt-of greatness that visited him, it could have sounded pompous, like a man who couldn’t stop boasting about his grand success, especially when he repeated at regular intervals, “People may call me great because till date, in the history of Bihar and Jharkhand, I am the first and last star in the true sense of the word, the only Bihari Babu.” But the rider that came along took the edge off the pompousness as SS once again cautioned anybody who was delusional about his greatness. “I myself never feel great, I only feel greatly blessed,” said he. “I did have the passion, I did go after the passion, passion *ko taraasha hain*, *nikhaarte gaye* (I polished the passion,

constantly improved on it), but there is no answer for why the lottery ticket fell into my hands and not yours. Thus, the winner of the lottery ticket has no right to show *ahankaar* (arrogance/ pride) because frankly, he just got lucky."

In his case, before destiny played its hand, only his passion prepped him for his role ahead. His track record in Patna certainly didn't portend any greatness. Once, he even had the college attendance register burnt and then played innocent by claiming he had 90% attendance.

All this snowballed into making him the Principal's most disfavoured student on the campus. NS Nagendranath, Principal of Patna Science College, couldn't wait to see the last of this campus no-gooder as his antics worsened with every passing day. "He disliked me intensely and there was no way I could have continued in the Science College. Had I remained there I would surely have been rusticated," SS accepted.

He dropped out of college in 1963 and ironically returned to the same campus 12 years later, this time as a celebrity guest because he had become the pride of Bihar.

The jubilant return to college remained a fresh memory for him. He played back the scene with great enthusiasm. "You can imagine what an emotional moment it was for me when the same college invited me as the Chief Guest at the Diamond Jubilee celebration of Patna Science College – the black sheep had returned as the blue-eyed boy!"

He conceded, "I believe they wanted to invite Jayaprakash Narayanji to the function but he couldn't make it and so I was invited.

"When I reached there, the entire Patna University had come to a standstill. For the first time in the history of Bihar, somebody had become such a major star after many hit films like *Kalicharan* and *Vishwanath*. That day, the entire city of Patna was jammed; every road led to the Science College. The public went crazy. IPS officer Amrinder Pratap Singh on his first posting as ASP to Patna, who was deputed to escort me to the function, was swept away by the waves of people and I could see only his cap bobbing up and down in the sea of human heads. (Amrinder Pratap Singh went on to become Director, CBI.) The girls had gone crazy, they broke through the barricades." Without the girls, the narration was incomplete.

His popularity overshadowed other respected alumni who had also come to attend the function and this included the ex-Principal of FTII, Mr Jagat Murari. An ex-student of Patna Science College, Mr Murari was, unlike SS, a topper

who had left college with a first class in MSc. “He was our guru at FTII,” SS said reverentially. “He was giving his speech when I entered and the whole stadium stopped listening to him to look at me and cheer my entry. I felt really bad and embarrassed that day because I was very respectful towards Murariji. But he had a smile on his face, a look of pride at his student having become so popular.”

By the time he returned to the campus as a celebrity, SS had grown used to the sound of his own voice booming before a mike, and he loved speaking from a public platform. The girls figured even up there on the dais when he gave his speech as the Chief Guest. He said into the mike, “After experiencing the way the girls were coming in waves to get close to me today, I have to tell you that I am the same person for whom the path would get cleared when I walked past. All the girls would run and hide in the common room and watch quietly from behind the safety of those walls…”

Those were early days of heady stardom when references to girls were frequent even in his public speeches, a youthful trait that toned down significantly after he entered public life as a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Or, after he gained maturity, whichever came later.

But his speech as Chief Guest at Patna Science College was delivered when swagger and brashness were constants in his personality. Describing his own speech, he continued, “I confessed to them that when I had left college, I had a lot of anger, *aakrosh* (bitterness over perceived injustice) stored inside me. I wasn’t sure which direction I was heading in. I had so much of frustration in me that I used to tell myself, ‘If I ever become somebody in life, one man against whom I’d definitely take revenge in public would be the respected Nagendranathji, Principal, Patna Science College.’”

This from the Chief Guest was greeted with deadly silence.

But he had thundered on, “…Today I want to tell all of you that if I were to ever meet respected Shri Nagendranathji, I would fall flat at his feet, *shaastang lete* (prostrate before him). I would ask for forgiveness and tell him, ‘Sir, whatever I am today, is because of you. I was completely wrong in feeling such resentment, such anger in my youth. Today, I admit that I got *marg darshan*, guidance from you. If I had not been up to such youthful tricks, you would not have thought of warning me with strict action and I would never have thought of going to FTII. And if I had not gone to FTII, I would not have become the celebrity, the star I am standing before you today. I would not have come back as

the Chief Guest at this function today. So Sir, I owe all that I am today to you. The *maan*, the *sammaan*, *ye sanskar aur marg darshan* (the respect and honour, the values and the guidance), I got it all because of you… Sir, I think you realised much before I did that this Science College was not the place for me to be in. You had realised that my inclination for art and culture was calling me from another direction. So the right direction came from you, Sir.'"

Whatever the impact of his theatrics on the audience, rare in a speech by any Chief Guest, SS looked back with pride at his performance that day.

"That became one of my best speeches," he patted himself. "I believe people told Shri Nagendranathji about my speech and he was happy to hear what I had said about him. But to my utter regret, I never did get to meet him after I left college. No, he did not attend the Diamond Jubilee function."

If this back-to-campus outing was an unforgettable moment for SS, so was an uncanny meeting with Pandit Vishnu Kant Jha in the days when the young rebel still rode his Humbug cycle.

SS narrated, "Ram bhaiya had excelled in studies and was going to America *paani ke jahaaz se.* Pandit Vishnu Kant Jha was a very renowned astrologer who had even been awarded the Padma Shri – perhaps the only astrologer to have been thus honoured – that too in the days when these awards were given very stringently, unlike today when they've lost their value and have got diluted and polluted. It was said that he was the astrologer to people in high places like Dr Rajendra Prasad and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Some people also believed that *unhone Kali Ma ko siddh kiya hua tha*, that he had imbibed many of Goddess Kali's powers.

"When my father took all four brothers to meet Pandit Vishnu Kant Jha, I went along absolutely half-heartedly. I was the most underestimated boy of the family, so you can imagine how I was squirming to go before the astrologer. I'd gone there riding that same old Humbug cycle, grumbling about where to park it."

What transpired there left him in no better mood at that time but began to hold immense significance whenever he looked back at it.

The man of the moment was, of course, brother Ram who'd done brilliantly in his studies and was off to America.

SS said, "Panditji looked at Dr Ram and it was amazing because he very accurately remarked, 'What's he doing here? He's got *videsh jaane ka yog*, he

should be abroad, in a foreign country.' It was uncanny, he'd absolutely hit the bull's eye because my brother was leaving the very next week for America. He said, 'S*aat samundar paar ka yog hai* (His destiny will take him across the seven seas).' My father had given him no clues about any of us and he asked Panditji, 'What will Ram do in his life?' Vishnu Kantji answered, 'He will shine in Physics *ya* (or) Mathemathics, he has to become a very big scientist.' He was right on target because my brother was a first class holder in Physics, a topper in Engineering and he became a scientist with NASA."

When it was SS' turn to show his hand, "I was so disinterested that I showed it casually, holding it upright, like the hand of the Congress Party. Panditji was equally casual as he glanced cursorily in my direction and then suddenly he became very alert. He came closer, caught hold of both my hands, looked at Kali Mata, then again at me and his expression completely changed. I thought it was all a big drama. He took out his magnifying glass, he peered at my hand again, looked once more at Kali Mata and the first line he uttered to my father was, '*Sinhasaab, is ladke ka to raj yog likha hai* (He has the destiny of a king).' Imagine me, with Rs 2.50 per month and a Humbug cycle, *raj yog*? But Panditji insisted, 'He's got *chakra*s (rings) on all ten fingers', and he predicted. 'This boy will become a very big *neta* of this country, *kuch aisa-waisa nahin banega, raj yog hai, raj yog* (It won't be ordinary success, his destiny will be that of royalty).' He will travel by *hawai jahaaz* (aeroplane) as frequently as we travel by rickshaws. Not only will he fly around the world, even his *naukar-chaakar* (staff) will travel by plane. *Desh-videsh mein* (At home and abroad), he will be much feted and celebrated. *Aur to aur* (Moreover),' he forecast that I would have the most beautiful wife one day. He used the words, '*Poonam ke chand ki tarah* (She will have the radiance of a full moon).' He actually said, 'Poonam'; he mentioned my wife's name. I remember that very clearly."

What seemed unbelievable to those who were witness to Pandit Vishnu Kant Jha's prediction turned into an incredible reality when they lived to see it all come true.

Years later, film star Shatrughan Sinha was air-dashing from Mumbai airport with his staff in attendance. As was his wont, the star told his personal staff (which consisted of his Late make-up man Pratap and batman-valet Bahadur) to go ahead and board the plane, he'd join them soon. Watching the whole scene was Pradeep Gupta, his college friend from Patna who looked like a man witnessing a miracle as he reminded SS about Pandit Vishnu Kant Jha's

prediction: “Do you remember he had predicted that your *naukar-chaakar* will also travel around the world by plane? That’s kismet.”

Poonam Sinha recalled a similar goosebump-giving story she had picked up from her husband’s Late friend, Madhava Jee.

Fifty years after the incident, and one year before his own death, Madhava Jee narrated it for the record. He peppered the narration with much Bhojpuri as he recalled one hot afternoon when SS and he, still schoolboys, were playing in the verandah of his bungalow. A Brahmin had appeared and said, “*Bahut pyaas lagi hain, bahut bhook bhi* (I’m very thirsty and hungry).”

As per tradition, the Brahmin was given water and food, after which he wanted to rest a while.

When he woke up, the ascetic felt indebted to them but didn’t have anything to offer the children in return for their kindness – instead he offered to foretell their future. He read Shatrughan’s palm, his fingers, his hand, his head, even his toes, and announced, ‘Chakravarty’.

“Shatrughan had *chakra*s on all twenty fingers and toes,” recalled Madhava Jee. “The Brahmin saw *chakra*s even under his feet, and forecast, ‘He will be such a big man that you won’t be able to pin him down.’

“He told us, ‘My name is Vishnu Dutt. In fifteen years, if I am not proved right, you can raise a dog in my name.’ He was so confident. In our circle of friends, no one expected Shatrughan to achieve anything significant. But around 1972-73, we witnessed such a phenomenal rise in his fortunes that we realised how right the prediction was.”

Those were early times when it seemed more fiction than prediction. In fact, the school and college terror riding a Humbug cycle seemed the last candidate for any kind of substantial achievement. More than anybody else, SS himself was only too aware that he came off as inferior in front of better achievers. In school, whenever SS compared himself to his buddy Pravin Kumar Sinha, he lost out in his own esteem.

“In school, I used to think Pravin was the last word in film star good looks. He was very fair and good looking while I was the original scar face. But today, everybody from my school probably thinks Shatrughan Sinha was the best looking of the lot,” he smiled at the strange manner in which success turned opinions around.

Certain innate qualities came to SS’ aid in his quest for fame and fortune, one

of them being, unwavering determination. “Once I made up my mind about something, the determination to pull it off was omnipresent.”

The determination to go where few dared, surfaced more like an act of rebellion during his college days.

He spoke of one particular incident. “A day trip had been organised for the girls and boys of Patna Science College to a famous tourist spot called Kokolat, a hilly area seventy to eighty kilometres from Patna. I was dropped from the trip because of my reputation but I found that unacceptable. How dare they all go out without me? I decided that irrespective of what it entailed, I would be a part of it.

“A friend of mine called Dhyan Deo Sharma, a toughie who was very fond of me, met me halfway at Bhaktiyarpur bus depot and took me with him in a rickshaw which he himself drove. It was blazing hot but we went on that long dusty ride and reached Kokolat when the bus was about to return. The professor in charge, Mr DN Singh who didn’t like me at all, couldn’t believe that I’d had the audacity to actually land up there. When he saw me sitting inside the bus, he took it as a personal affront and put his foot down. He said, ‘This bus won’t go back to Patna. You have not been invited to join us on this trip, so until you are out of this bus, it will not move.’ It was getting dark and I didn’t want to be left alone in a jungle. But at the same time, I had to get out of the bus. So, unknown to the professor, some of my friends helped me climb atop the bus. There I was, up on the bus, lying down, holding the bars. There were big vessels on top of the bus, picnic material. I was angry at being thrown out and it was such a rough ride that my entire body was being flung up and down. Inside the bus, the professor and others didn’t realise that the thumping on the roof was me, they thought it was the vessels. En route, out of frustration, I kept throwing out the vessels, utensils and plates. It gave me sadistic pleasure to do that. I now realise that a ride like that was actually a stunt man’s job but the determination was so strong that I managed to stay up there till we reached Bhaktiyarpur. When the bus stopped for a tea and snacks break, I got down, lit a cigarette and stood puffing before the professor. Everybody was taken aback and wondered how I’d reached there. Some of the girls were quite thrilled with this display of heroics. To this day, I can’t forget the look of utter hatred on my professor’s face.

“But the story didn’t end there. My friend Dhyan Deo had some very influential friends in the transport department there. We created a situation where the bus just wasn’t allowed to leave. They pretended that the bus had a problem. But by about 11.30 pm, I myself started getting edgy. I felt that with girls in the

bus, we should move. The professor looked completely helpless seeing a sadistic smile of triumph on our faces. The determination of an eighteen-year-old boy to make the authorities look apologetic and helpless was so firm that when we saw it on his face, we decided to let the bus move, and returned to Patna by a different one."

To his credit, SS didn't avoid talking about such escapades, however poorly he may have come off in the bargain.

"I know it was a stupid, childish thing to have done. I shouldn't have," he conceded. "I hold no grudge against that professor. If I were in his place today, perhaps I'd have done the same thing he did. But I have tremendous love and affection for Dhyan Deo, the friend who helped me that day. Why I have chosen to narrate this incident at this stage of my life is to underline how utterly determined I could be. Today it might seem like an insignificant, even foolhardy feat but at the age of seventeen or eighteen, to have pulled off such a big thing was very tough and the determination had to be very intense. Anything could've happened to me that day."

What did happen was that the wayward fourth son of the illustrious BP Sinha got an extra dose of adrenaline after his successful run at defying authority. There was no question of redemption as he continued to flounder and fail in the subjects chosen for him by his father.

SS drew the portrait of a man who was so disciplined that he couldn't comprehend an unconventional son who refused to fall in line.

"In direct contrast to my father, I was never punctual all my life, whether I had to meet Atalji or Advaniji or Jayaprakash Narayanji or go for a shoot. In the studios, I was often told legendary tales of Pran's or Madhubala's punctuality. But none of them could match my father's discipline and punctuality. My father often chided me that despite being his son, how could I fetch up late everywhere and that too by hours? He'd ask me, 'When someone else arrives late to meet you and that troubles you, why don't you understand that your latecoming could also hurt someone?' But as Oscar Wilde said, 'Punctuality is the thief of time,' because you stop whatever you are doing to reach somewhere on time. Going by the clock has always been an over-extolled virtue," SS dryly observed.

If the carelessness over his timing changed in later years, it was not BP Sinha's badgering that did it. Strangely, it was politics that somewhat reformed him. "Usually people go into politics and *bigad jaate hain*, get corrupted in their ways but I improved after going into politics," he briefly commented before

returning to his father.

“My father’s discipline was something else. When I later went to the Film Institute in Pune, I would send home a telegram telling the family when I would be arriving. He had strict timings and if he had to go to bed at 9 pm, he would, irrespective of whether I had reached home or not. He was so particular about his timings that even when my brothers got married, everybody had to scurry around to make sure he was given his dinner by 6.30-7 pm, or he wouldn’t eat at all. Breakfast was at 8.30 am, 10.30 to 11 am lunch, 6.30 pm dinner. No tea, no coffee, no alcohol but he used to smoke.” On this front, it was a clear case of like father, like son, as SS detailed, “My father smoked but he also had such strong will power that once he quit it, he never looked back. He had begun to feel, how could he be a role model if he smoked in front of his children? So he gave it up. I have the same will power which is why I could also quit smoking and never go back to it.”

His father’s enforcement of discipline may not have had much effect on SS but some important lessons taught by his father stayed with the actor. One of these was a basic requisite in etiquette that one must show a person before turning up at his doorstep. Another was the importance of how every action should be weighed to see how it affects the other party.

“Once, when I went home from FTII, Baba was very angry. I also reacted and wondered what was wrong with sending them a telegram. He told me, ‘Why couldn’t you have written us a letter? When your telegram arrived, first and foremost, we had to get a glass of water, then sit and prepare ourselves for it because telegrams usually mean bad news. A telegram brings palpitations to the receiver. When you went to book your train ticket in advance, why couldn’t you write a letter at that time telling us when you’d be arriving? Why a telegram at the last minute when you knew your programme well in advance and there was enough time for a letter?’ I realised he had a point because I had taken the easy route by sending them a telegram at the last minute which had disturbed them greatly. It had also unnecessarily cost a lot more than a letter.

“Similarly, I once went home without informing my family and my father was again very angry. I was taken aback: why should I inform anybody to go to my own house? But what I learnt from my father that day has remained with me to this day. It’s something I’d like to tell everybody else too. I questioned my father and asked him, ‘Isn’t this my house? Why shouldn’t I come home without informing anybody?’ And he said to me, ‘Do you know that we were all going to

Benares today? It's sheer luck that the train was cancelled and we returned home. What if you had come to a locked house? Who'd have opened it for you? What would you have done?' He taught me that day that whenever you go anywhere, even if it is your own parents' or brother's house, you must check with them beforehand when it would be convenient to go over to their place. He was absolutely right. Today when somebody turns up without an appointment, it hassles me because he is coming at his convenience, uncaring about the convenience of the person he is visiting. Some people feel bad about it when I make it clear that I don't like people dropping in casually without prior appointment. It is not a formality, it is a courtesy. It is a vital lesson I learnt from my father."

Irrespective of how fine a man he was, SS' father was also a human being. So he had his share of flaws. SS learnt one more life-changing lesson by default – not to force a child to follow in the father's footsteps.

"I want readers to realise from my experience that the aptitude of the child is paramount and not what his parents want him to do. I was simply not inclined towards it but I was forced to go to Patna Science College, and from there to a homoeopathic college while my natural aptitude lay in a different direction altogether. Luckily, I got admission to FTII, Poona, otherwise every attempt was made to get me into a medical college in Patna. But by the time that was arranged and I was summoned back to Patna, I'd seen FTII as my escape route and destination. I'd made up my mind that FTII was where my future lay. I knew that this was home."

Brother Bharat gave a different spin to BP Sinha's apprehensions about his youngest son. "My father was concerned as a parent because Shatrughan was surrounded by a wrong group of friends. Some of them from that crowd are still around him. They are all worth minus-100 without Shatrughan."

With BP Sinha unwilling to encourage or sponsor SS' foray into films, it was once again second brother Dr Lakhan Sinha who came to his aid. "FTII was a new institute, Sonu must have been in the 2nd or 3rd batch," recalled Lakhan. "At first, he was sceptical and replied, 'Huh, how am I going to be selected?' They used to select only ten girls and boys for the acting course from all over the country. I argued, 'If you can't compete for FTII, how can you compete against such big stars in Bombay?' He was convinced with my line of thought and he applied."

The determination that drove a notorious young student to join a college

picnic in defiance of his professor's dictum, surfaced once more when he turned a blind eye to his father's disapproval and swaggered his way to Calcutta (now Kolkata) to face his first interview for admission to the prestigious Film and Television Institute of India.

But it was dramatic on the home front before he got there.

Lakhan fleshed it out: "Photographs, application fee and so on must have worked out to a few hundred which was a big amount those days. Luckily, I was earning well – Rs 750 per month in the mid-sixties. So Sonu sent his application to FTII although he thought he wouldn't get in."

SS was so sure that the stringent entry rules would disqualify him straightaway that he didn't dare hope to get a call for an interview in Calcutta. Lakhan recalled the pessimism with much amusement: "When the postman gave me the letter for his interview, Sonu was at the corner of the street. I shouted out to him, 'Hey, you've got a call for an interview,' but he didn't believe me and walked off. I started running behind him with the letter while he walked faster and faster away from me, thinking I was pulling a fast one on him. I finally caught up with him and only after he read the letter did he believe me.

"All this while, we had done everything behind Baba's back. Now the real problem surfaced: how to send him to Calcutta. At this juncture, my father had to come into the picture and he straightaway said, 'He is already so spoilt. Once he goes there, he will get totally spoilt.' But he did not oppose him much because he felt Sonu wouldn't be able to compete at such a level. So Sonu went to Calcutta for the interview and when he came back, he was more confident. But he was still a long way from getting in. When they were selecting only ten, and you were from Bihar, you were already at a disadvantage."

Besides, SS had nothing on his resume to recommend him for an acting course.

"With my scarred face and tall, lean, mean looks, I knew that the only qualification I could fall back on would be my confidence," SS took over the narrative. "By the time I went for the interview, I had built up enough confidence to go for it, and while other applicants were tense and rehearsing scenes, I was back to being carefree and imitating people. People were sitting under trees and enacting scenes. I had a firm, 'I have to be selected' belief and I went in armed with only my stock of confidence.

"There were four centres for the interviews – Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. That's how these cities were named; they became Mumbai, Kolkata and

Chennai later on. There were other talented candidates like Kolyan Chatterjee (from Calcutta) and Nipon Goswami (from Assam) who had also been called for an interview. All of them were very surprised at my cool."

His chest-heaving confidence was hardly enough to carry SS through the portals of FTII and into the Hindi film industry. He had to know his strengths, check his flaws and market his best, which he did instinctively. As he pointed out, "What the corporate sector calls SWOT analysis which stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, is something I did with myself right from the beginning."

Chicago-based orthopaedic surgeon Dr Upendra Sinha who knew him from his college days, remembered, "After he returned to Patna, all of us went to a small restaurant and when he showed us how he had enacted a scene at the interview, my hair stood on end. I wrote on the wall with my fork, 'He has been selected.' We were all immature but we knew that he was different from us all. He was not normal like you or me, he was something else."

He did get selected – on his own merit. No Dad's influence, no fancy surname, no privileged seat. The swagger now had substance.

"The panel chose me because they found me very confident and felt I could be moulded. They found me different and talented," SS assessed the acceptance. "The panel that chose me included ex-Principal Jagat Murari, cinematographer Lal Jaswani and filmmaker Mrinal Sen who was the main person. Later in life, in many of my speeches, I used to say that if anyone considered me a non-actor, they may please contact Mr Mrinal Sen because he was the culprit who chose me for FTII."

Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Sinha, the academician, was unimpressed by his son's admission to FTII and refused to sign the papers. Lakhan remembered his father's stand: "He said, 'I won't spend a single penny on him.' He was very angry with me as well. When applying, I had signed his form as his guardian. So I took the responsibility of financing him. On an average, Sonu's expenses at FTII worked out to Rs 250 per month. Dressco was the No 1 tailor in Patna and Rauf was its owner-cum-friend. Whenever Sonu came for a vacation, he would go to Rauf and get one or two suits made for himself. After he left Patna, Rauf would give me the bill. At that time, a suit would cost about Rs 250. I remember when I went to the US, I'd ordered a suit for myself and it had cost me Rs 300. Sonu would get nice clothes made for himself. I was fine with that because I was aware that in showbiz, he needed to be smartly dressed."

For the well-qualified and conventional BP Sinha, his son's decision to learn acting was tough to come to terms with. "My father had studied in America in the early fifties but he was still traditional enough not to accept that one could undergo training for acting," SS put it bluntly. Fortunately, there was no real burden on the youngest son of a secure family to start making a living and contribute to the running of the household. Besides, he had older siblings to indulge him and speak up for him.

His brothers were game to let SS go forth and seek his fortune in the manner he desired. He reminisced, "My eldest brother Dr Ram Sinha was in America, Dr Lakhan Sinha was teaching at the Engineering College of Technology in Jamshedpur and Dr Bharat Sinha was just settling down as a doctor. I was very lucky that my brothers discussed it amongst themselves and decided that since they were all doing well, they could take a chance and let the youngest go ahead and pursue his dream. They felt, if he doesn't make it, he can always become a compounder. But the fact is, I wasn't fit to become even a compounder." He added, self-deprecatingly, "Isn't it ironical that one day I became the Health Minister of India? That's what a democracy is all about."

In 1965, when SS stepped out of Bhuvaneshwar Niwas to head for FTII, there were three distinctly different emotions on display. Enthusiastic friends who had gathered to see off the adventurous one were high on adrenaline. Father BP Sinha was far too miffed to miss his routine – even though his youngest son was leaving home after midnight to catch a late-night train to Bombay, he went to sleep at his usual time. And mother Shyama Devi was in an emotional twist – she almost fainted with anxiety.

SS gave a clear picture of the farewell scene in Kadam Kuan, Patna: "With my mother fainting with emotional stress, I was in a turmoil. The rickshaw had already been loaded with my luggage. But seeing my mother, I also started crying and saying, 'I won't go'. Just as there's a thin line between *pagalpan* (madness) and bravery, there is a very thin line between a firm decision and a U-turn. I nearly turned the decision into a U-turn and started taking out my luggage from the rickshaw when my friends stopped me and said, 'No, no, go ahead.' My mother too said, '*Hum theek hai, aap jaayiye* (I'm fine, you carry on).' I U-turned again and got on to the rickshaw. Still crying, we reached the railway station. I went to keep my luggage in the bogey. When I looked around, I was stunned – the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen in my life was in my compartment. She was sitting right in front of me. It was Promi, now Mrs

Poonam Sinha.”

2

The Climb To The Top

Tell your story… Tell everyone it's possible,
and others shall feel the courage to climb their own mountains.

Paulo Coelho

The trauma of leaving home was too fleeting to dampen SS' youthful spirit as the excitement of a train ride with the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen and the overwhelming sights of Maharashtra, overtook all other emotions. The past went into soft focus, the future beckoned with its clear light.

The first time SS set foot in Bombay, he stayed in Chembur with Lakhan's friend Bipin (Brajendra Narayan) who too hailed from Patna. His first glimpse of the city left him speechless. "I was struck by the awesomeness of the city. What tall buildings, what broad roads! I reacted to the big city like a typical Bihari *bauwa*."

The awesomeness had its downside too, as the baby step he took into neighbouring Poona was dispiritingly lonely. There wasn't a soul to greet him. It was a complete contrast to the full-throated life he had led in Patna. Further, admissions to FTII started only two days later, so he had to pretty much fend for

himself in the new city. But with the enthusiasm of his young years, he pushed ahead without a backward glance.

One of the first people he met and befriended on his first day in Poona, was Mohinder Verma from the Cinematography course. “I stayed in a lodge for the first couple of days,” SS smiled at the way his trek to stardom had begun. “I was excited about being by myself in a new city and told Mohinder, ‘*Pehle ghoomne chalenge*, let’s take a look at the city and then eat at a hotel.’ I was really keen to get a good look at Poona. We went to Sambhaji Park but a little past 9.30 pm, we were literally kicked out of the place. Those days, there was no way you could get food at that time anywhere in Poona. I think I got some milk from somewhere for 4 annas. So on my first night, I went to sleep practically on an empty stomach.

“On the second day, Mohinder and I went cycling, double seat. We were stopped by a policeman but realising that I was an outsider, he was kind enough to let us off without a fine. That was also the day I got my first culture shock when I saw girls cycling. Today you see girls in Lucknow, Patna, everywhere but not in the late sixties. I actually stood there and gaped at them because I’d never seen such a sight before.

“On the third day, I went to FTII and got my admission. I was noticed for the way I looked. I was very lean with my shirt tucked in, very dark, tall, almost 6’2” in height, and weighed only fifty-five kgs. I could see the others gauging me, wondering whether to rag me or ignore me. I got ragged just a little bit in the canteen. They asked me how many brothers we were. When I said, ‘Four’, they asked me, ‘What would you have done if you were five?’ It was mild ragging. Soon they saw my acting and when I stood on a table in the canteen and did a villainous act, they were a bit taken aback. They knew *yeh ladka bhari padega*, he’s going to be tough to get around,” he stated unabashedly. “Slowly but surely, I became the ring leader, the canteen king.”

Here too, it was his cinema-loving sibling, Lakhan who visited him. SS had spoken animatedly to his family about a Manoj Kumar-lookalike, Trilokinath Parashar from Agra, a new friend he’d made at FTII. SS had foreseen great stardom for Trilokinath (screen name, Parminder), something that didn’t come true at all. When Lakhan reached FTII, the first person he bumped into was Parminder. The warm and affectionate welcome he received convinced Lakhan that his younger sibling’s ability to make friends was at work here too.

It was also evident that SS had become one of the top students of FTII,

leaving Lakhan with the satisfaction of having backed the right horse.

“The acting course was very engrossing,” SS stated with the contentment of one who’d found his true calling. “I was getting good, sound training and enjoying it too. Asrani (the actor) was my tutor, Roshan Taneja was our professor. Asrani has said in many of his speeches that the one person he saw working on himself twenty-four hours was Shatrughan Sinha.”

It didn’t take long for SS to draw attention to himself. He also fell in love with the city.

“In Poona, my next-door neighbours were Congress-I leaders Sushil Kumar Shinde, former Home Minister of India, and Vilasrao Deshmukh, the Late Chief Minister of Maharashtra. Vilasraoji would often remark, ‘Don’t we look like long lost brothers from the Kumbh Mela?’ Many people felt that we resembled each other: the same hairstyle, the same kind of moustache, the same style of dressing. He and Sushil Kumarji were senior to me; they were learning Law but all of us knew one another well.” The inclination to bond with people outside the entertainment fraternity was obviously strong in SS.

Bonds with the opposite gender were also inevitable. “In Poona, for the first time in my life, girls openly showed interest in me,” he recalled with pleasure. “Poona was the first place where I was on my own. That’s why Patna and Poona, Bihar and Maharashtra, hold a special place in my heart. Like Lord Krishna’s two mothers, Devakimaiya and Yashodama, I was born and brought up in Patna, Bihar but got my training and education in Poona. It was love at first sight with Poona and I’m grateful to Maharashtra. I will be grateful to this State all my life because if I hadn’t come here, if I hadn’t got my training here, who would’ve even heard about me?”

Poona provided the foundation, Bombay gave him stardom. He loved the acting course at FTII, so far removed from Physics and Chemistry. But here too, his strong opinions prevented him from wholeheartedly accepting all that FTII could offer him.

“I made two mistakes while training at FTII,” he rued. “I didn’t care to attend dance and yoga classes; I was unaware of their importance in my future. As soon as I’d enter the yoga class in the morning, I’d go into *shavasan* (corpse posture in yoga) and fall asleep. If I was pulled up, I’d say, I’m breathing. I treated the dancing lessons with the same disdain. Mrs Malviya who taught us dance was beautiful – very fair with blue eyes. And I tried hard to become her blue-eyed boy. I concentrated more on the teacher than on what she taught us, and would

be turned out of the class most of the time." By now all his natural traits that had somewhat been curbed as a wary newcomer, came to the fore again and SS became both notorious and popular on the FTII campus.

Ignoring dance and yoga classes proved costly later on in life as dance, he discovered, was essential in Hindi cinema (even for a man) and yoga was vital for his all-round well-being.

"Yoga, which I had neglected at FTII became such a passion with me in later years that I've practised it with unfailing regularity for over thirty-five years. It has kept my blood pressure in check and controlled the stress levels that arise because of overwork, late nights and a sleep-deprived lifestyle. Yoga also helped me combat the only bad habit I had picked up in life – my very unhealthy habit of smoking."

Among all his achievements in the glamour and political worlds, he recalled with utmost pride his combat with tobacco. "It made me realise that if it took such laboured effort to quit a relatively mild habit like smoking, then how incalculable the effort must be to give up far stronger addictions. That's why I firmly believe that drugs, tobacco, *zarda*, *gutka* (addictive consumerables), any kind of addiction, cannot be got rid of by scolding, beating or threatening the user. They have to be handled with kindness, understanding, maturity and patience, like you would treat a patient. An addict needs encouragement, family support, the right kind of counselling and love. That's what helped me kick the butt, and I'm the happier for it today."

His second negligence at FTII caught up with him in the film studios of Bombay.

"I had to pay a heavy price for not taking my dance classes seriously," he accepted. "During the filming of *Raampur Ka Lakshman* (1972), Kamal dance master was picturising the chartbuster, 'Pyar Ka Samai Kum Hai Jahan...' with Rekha, Randhir Kapoor and me, and I had to give thirteen retakes. Another superhit song, 'Pukaro Mujhe Phir Pukaro...' picturised on Farida Jalal and me in *Buniyaad* (1972), also required thirteen retakes to get it right. They were ego-busting experiences." He said regretfully, "If only I had taken my dance classes seriously, I wouldn't have had to face this humiliation because otherwise I had gained popularity as a 'one-take' artiste."

But in every other way, the training at FTII gave the unmoored SS an opportunity to anchor himself, work towards a dream goal and cover new ground. It was here that he first discovered the joy of an instant response from a

live audience. “I did *Yatri*, a play for the first time in my life,” he could still recall its pleasurable aftertaste. “I got so many compliments for it; it was a new high that I discovered. I played a complete villain who finally breaks down and repents. *Yatri* was based on the real headline-making story of a girl who had been abandoned at the railway station by her lover. Even Jawaharlal Nehru and others had got involved in it and had supported the girl.”

He was at home on stage because of the confidence he exuded. “There is a very thin line between confidence and over-confidence,” he warned. “Confidence has to be backed by something substantial, substantiated by performance. My determination to head somewhere brought in confidence and it was a huge asset for me at the Institute. The key to my comfort level on stage was undoubtedly my confidence, a quality that took me very far in life. Otherwise, I was bogged down by complexes too,” he revealed vulnerably. “There was a very famous pose of mine where my fingers would cover half my face. It was actually because I was shying away from girls, hiding my scars and fearing jibes over scarface wanting to be a hero.”

FTII brought out a different dimension to the indifferent, irreverent boy from Patna. “It is a fact that I was a very different person at the Institute,” he acknowledged. “Unlike the science course that was forced upon me in Patna, the acting course in FTII interested me immensely. That’s why I tell parents who want to turn their kids into engineers and doctors, ‘Go by the aptitude of the child. Don’t force your ambitions on him.’ Fortunately for me, I found my forte at the Institute.

“FTII energised me. Every three months, I found my body and personality changing and I could feel deep within me that I was on the right track. Today, when I attend a function at any medical college as an honoured guest, I maintain that if I had opted for medicine, I would still have been a student because I would never have cleared the course. When I had to dissect a frog in college and I saw blood oozing, my heart had frozen. I was simply not fit for a career in medicine or surgery.”

At FTII, SS made lifelong friends and struck up a close equation with award-winning cinematographers KK Mahajan and Manjul Prabhat, sound recordist Dinesh Chaturvedi and Firoze Chinoy who directed his first student film *And Unto The Void*. It became almost a cult film and was shown to generations of students as a model performance about a condemned prisoner.

Another film titled *Are We Doing All This?* directed by Roshan Taneja on

student life also introduced SS to stylised acting. There was a scene in it where he looked at a girl, turned around and growled, "*Kuch thanda lao* (Bring me a cold drink)," with great panache. *"Thanda lao"* became so popular that it was greeted with applause and cheer. A fan moment also followed when a canteen boy at Maratha Mandir went up to SS and told him, "Hey, *'Kuch thanda lao', bahut achcha dialogue bola* (Hey, it's a great piece of dialogue)."

It was an early indication that SS had an impressive, impactful dialogue delivery.

He later repaid his debt to his first director when he became a huge star in Bombay and backed Firoze who had not made his mark in Hindi cinema. He threw his star value into a film called *Do Raha* which Firoze had bagged as director. "I did *Do Raha* free of cost only for him. The producer thought I'd done it for him," he snorted derisively. "And he promised me that after the release, he would give me a Fiat car. I turned him down but he insisted that I would have to take it; he wouldn't accept a 'No'. But once the film was released, and it became a golden jubilee hit, forget about a car, I didn't get even a cycle for it!" It was a typical filmland promise – empty.

As students, Shatrughan and Parashar sometimes dated girls to make a foursome. SS recalled, "Both of us had befriended two very nice and good-looking girls from Fergusson College in Poona. But the girl I went out with started getting too serious about me. For the first time in my life, I received a love letter that ran into an entire sixty-four-page Titaghar notebook. She sent it to me in Patna but I was not prepared for a commitment. By then I had met Promi too, on the train to Poona. And all I could think of was my career. There was another girl from a very big political family who was friendly with Parashar but midstream changed loyalties and became very fond of me. She would phone me up, wait for my calls. All these distractions happened as they would to any young man. Subhash Ghai used to meet his girlfriend Rehana (now his wife) and she would ask me to keep an eye on him. I'd go out to look for him and find Parashar's girl waiting for me. I saw her again about ten to fifteen years ago. She was still very beautiful with the same *kashish* (seductive appeal) in her eyes."

There was a valid explanation for the repeated references to the opposite sex and it didn't revolve around treating them as conquests. "The reason I mention the girls is to illustrate that life had brought me to a new crossroad. I could've gone down any path," said he. "But I was clear that I had to build a career for myself in Maharashtra. As long as I was struggling, I avoided getting into a

serious involvement with any girl because my *laqsh* (goal) was something else. I hadn't come here to become a villain; my *laqsh* was to become a big actor, a name that would blaze the marquee. You know what the soothsayers had predicted for me.

"I didn't lead anybody up the garden path because I was aware that I hadn't achieved anything in life. I had no money, no work, no name of my own. I was looking for *sahara* (support) for myself; I could hardly have taken the responsibility of looking after anybody else at that juncture. I had the *lagan*, the dedication to make a name for myself. There were expectations from me; I had expectations from myself and there were others too who were watching me. If I had failed, I would have let all of them down. I could not afford to go astray; I had to stick to the path that led to my goal."

It wasn't easy because there was also the big hurdle of overcoming parochial prejudices against his State. At FTII, he encountered a marked bias towards Punjabis who have traditionally been considered best suited for the Hindi film industry.

"Yes, I saw a bit of it at FTII," he recalled with regret. "Fortunately, giants like Adoor Gopalkrishnan, from States like Kerala, had come to the Institute before me. I was also fortunate that Ritwik Ghatak, a genius considered next only to Satyajit Ray, was our Vice-Principal and he was very fond of me."

The complex of being a Bihari gradually receded. Slowly, the prejudice against the unconventional star aspirant began to melt.

One of the friends he made for life was Jarnail Singh (who is no more). It was this hearty Punjabi who introduced the boy from Patna to the joys of a Patiala peg.

"I didn't even know how to drink and initially I had thrown up violently," SS recollected. "All through my years at FTII, I had a drink only on two occasions."

While he outgrew the complex of being from Bihar, regionalism persisted on the campus. He traced it to Roshan Taneja, the teaching guru he looked up to, and the only person outside his family whose feet he touched.

SS replayed the past: "Despite being one of the biggest success stories of FTII, I am not a gold medallist. I did not even get a first class at the Institute. And it had nothing to do with our performance.

"Unfortunately," he explained, "parochialism had entered the precincts. Today I don't nurse a grudge against anybody. Some of them have become very good

friends of mine, and they're really good souls. Baldev Khosa who was a year junior to me at FTII is with the Congress Party in Mumbai. Jarnail Singh who was in my class and would copy Rajendra Kumar, was affable but very aggressive. Till the end of his life he helped drug addicts and did great social service. But those days, the Punjabis had formed a gang. I don't blame them; they were also away from their families and homes. But in class too, they would start talking to Tanejasaab in Punjabi which didn't go down well with many of us. He was a teacher; he belonged to all of us. But it put so much pressure on Tanejasaab that even though many thought I would get the gold medal, ours was the only batch where nobody got even a first class. If at all I have any *shikayat* (complaint) against Tanejasaab, it would only be that regionalism and its resultant pressure made us all second class pass-outs. Imagine, the batch from which I, one of the biggest success stories of FTII emerged, didn't have a gold medallist or even a first class in it. In later years, Tanejasaab was remorseful about it."

If one were to overlook that parochial lapse, his gratitude to FTII remained undiluted. "I cannot say for sure if I would've become such a big star if I had not gone to FTII but I can say that had I not gone there, I would not have become such a good actor," SS was unstinted in his praise of his alma mater. "If you have to become a Lata Mangeshkar or Mohammed Rafi, however good a bathroom singer you may be, you've got to go through proper training. Raw talent *ko taraashna bahut zaroori hai,* it requires polishing. I learnt the importance of timing, discipline, performance, flexibility, body language, the right use of language and more at FTII."

Providentially, that unfortunate brush with regionalism didn't leave him embittered, especially because Maharashtra embraced him without prejudice and with liberal warmth.

"I have often been asked if I had any problems because I was from Bihar, and my answer has always been, 'My *janambhoomi* (birthplace) is Bihar but my *karmabhoomi* (workplace) is Maharashtra.' If I had not come here, perhaps I would never have achieved the kind of worldwide fame that I got. *Duniya mein meri pehchaan, value nahin hoti* (I would have had no identity in this world). Maharashtra is a land of opportunity and hope, *yahan sapne saakar hote hai*. Dreams come true here for hundreds of thousands of people. Personally, I have never experienced any prejudice or *bhed-bhaav* (discrimination) against me. I will be grateful to Maharashtra for several lifetimes for not only nurturing me

but also my children and my family."

It was not just Poona and Bombay but the Hindi film industry too, which acknowledged talent without caste and colour reservations. SS talked of his entry into Hindi cinema joyfully.

"Like Asrani, my junior colleague Paintal too, used to remark that I was constantly evolving and progressing. The first realisation that my confidence gave me was not that I was ahead of others but that I was not less than anybody else. It gave me a sense of equality. In the film industry, the only colour that is recognised is that of success and the only smell they avoid is that of failure, wherever it may come from. That's why some people even from Maharashtra or Punjab have not made it while an unconventional Danny Denzongpa from Sikkim and Mithun Chakraborty from Bengal could hit the big-time in the seventies. It was such a huge change for the film industry that Raj Kapoor remarked, 'We had fair-skinned heroes at first and now we have black ones.' It didn't matter whether we came from Bihar or Meghalaya or Kerala. The film industry accepted us without reservation."

Poona and FTII became home turf for the boy from Patna. But in 1967, there was another upheaval in store as he came out of the comfort zone of the FTII campus to face the sprawling city of Bombay, armed with only a diploma in acting as his passport to the film studios.

His name was a major point of debate. In a sea of rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed Punjabi boys led by the Kapoors, Kumars and a Deol, there came two 'Big B's with unusual faces and unrecognisable surnames. They were two stubborn men from the Hindi belt who didn't exchange their natural identities for the promise of stardom. Amitabh Bachchan who became the world-renowned Big B and Shatrughan Sinha, the beloved Bihari Babu of Hindi cinema, were both six-footers, their names coincidentally added up to the same total of fifteen letters, their distinctive voices and clear diction became legendary, and each upturned existing formulas in the film industry.

Considering the overwhelming odds stacked against him, especially in his chosen field where Kapoorian good looks ruled, when he walked in, SS' gait was tinged with the arrogance of one who believed that stardom would one day belong to him. He agreed with a chuckle, "True, I entered the film industry announcing, 'Confidence, thy name is Shatrughan Sinha!' I came in with the swagger and confidence of a star saying, 'Accept me as I am, scars and all. I won't do plastic surgery; I won't change my name.'"

It wasn't as easy as it sounded. Initially, he was very apprehensive. "I didn't have the shadow of a far-off relative in Bombay. How would I survive in the strange, big city?"

Unease over the future was a common fear shared by many of the diploma holders rolling out of FTII. During one such discussion, a senior called Mohan Kaviya (who later worked with filmmaker Mohan Saigal), gave SS a tip that boosted his self-esteem: "Either prove yourself better or prove yourself different."

"That became my biggest mantra," SS proclaimed. "I firmly resolved right at the beginning that I had to be better than the others or at the very least, be different from the rest. Slowly but surely, I gained that position. To this day, I don't claim to be better than everybody else but I'm certainly different from the rest."

His style of dialogue delivery became an instant hit with mimicry artistes, and *"Khamosh"* became his one-word identity.

"Surprisingly, *'Khamosh'* didn't come from one of his films," revealed fellow Bihari, Shekhar Suman. "It was Prithviraj's thunderous *'Khamosh'* every time he vented his anger in *Mughal-e-Azam* that inspired Sonu bhaiya. He repeated it with such flair that he became famous for it."

"Khamosh" became such a part of SS' repertoire that he was himself surprised by its impact. "Stardom can often give a twist, almost a new life to something," SS observed, struck by the by-products of fame. "'*Khamosh'* would normally translate into, 'Silence' or 'Shut up' which is not amusing, it is offensive," he analysed. But once it became his *takeeya kalam*, his signature exclamation, "*Khamosh"* became a word that made the listener smile. SS buoyantly agreed, "Girls, children, everybody loves *'Khamosh'*. Even in Pakistan, little kids would come up and say, 'Uncle, just once, please say *"Khamosh!"'* The way I used the word was another manifestation of my being different from the rest."

He had other strengths too that offset the absence of conventional film star good looks or a godfather in the industry.

Dr Upendra Sinha, a friend from Patna, talked of SS' memory. "He'd remember hundreds of telephone numbers and always had a huge network of contacts all over the world."

There was the additional ability to remain unruffled at all times. Upendra

narrated an incident that illustrated SS' equanimity. "When he had just come out of the Institute, I visited him in Bombay and stayed with him at Lovely Guest House in Santacruz. One night at 2 am, there was an earthquake. The whole building was shaking and people were rushing out. But even in that commotion, he shrugged casually and said, 'Don't worry.' I was surprised that he could stay calm even during an earthquake."

On that visit, SS took Upendra to meet veteran actor Balraj Sahni. "We met his handsome son Parikshat too who had just returned from Moscow. Later, I wanted to see the salty waters of Bombay. I'd never seen a beach before. Shatrughan dropped me to Juhu beach – he had some work to do – and promised to come back and fetch me. I went for a run on the beach when I saw Parikshat jogging with a companion. He greeted me warmly and said, 'Hello doctor. I can tell that your friend is going to be somebody very big one day. He's just got it in him.'"

SS was making an impact.

His pocket money used to be Rs 150 per month which took care of all his expenses at FTII and in Bombay while he hunted for work. The princely sum got him one starry 555 cigarette a day, the brand his idol Raj Kapoor smoked. A bottle of cola was available for 25 paise and the actor remembered with fondness that Rs 1.50 at a Sardarji's hotel near Bandra Station fetched him a whole meal that included *rajma* (kidney beans) or *dal* (lentils), mutton and *tandoori roti* (Indian bread made in a clay oven). Green chillies and onions were on the house. All the strugglers, including Subhash Ghai, would get a satisfactory fill there. But that was an infrequent once-a-day treat, and carrying on without the next meal became almost a daily ritual.

Evenings at an *adda* (cheap liquor den) were also regular features where strugglers met and networked. Contacts were made and given and each drew from the other the confidence and courage to keep forging ahead.

Those were the days when Krishna Kunj Lodge in Andheri provided a roof over SS' head, a roof under which also lived and dreamed four other strugglers. The rent: Rs 60 per month which came out of his total budget of Rs 150. His roommates included Bipin Upadhyaya, the Sinha loyalist who stayed with him till the very end (Bipin passed away in 2008), RR Pathak who became a film publicist, and sound recordist Suresh Kathuria (a name often seen in the credit titles of hundreds of Hindi movies).

When life was just fine on a budget of Rs 150 per month, any sum above that

was a bonus to be welcomed. That was precisely what happened to SS within months of stepping into Bombay. Creatively well-acknowledged filmmaker, the Late Mani Kaul who was a senior from FTII, directed SS to an office at Natraj Hotel in Marine Drive where an English film was under production.

“It turned out to be the office of King Brothers who were making the Maya Series in English,” SS recalled. Karan Diwan, once a veteran actor, was in charge of the production department. “The first film I worked in for the Maya Series was named *The Witness* in which I had the role of a villain. Karan Diwan liked me and asked me, ‘How much will you charge?’ I had no clue what to ask for.”

What fee to quote and how to ask for it, was an art that FTII had not taught him. “I also had no relative connected with films nor did I have any practical experience,” SS pointed out. He, therefore, chose to remain silent and was taken aback when Karan Diwan asked him if he’d be okay with a fee of Rs 150 a day. A day? That was his sum for the entire month. “It was a big amount for me,” he stated guilelessly. “If I had negotiated with him, perhaps I could have got Rs 500 or even Rs 1,000,” he remarked in hindsight. “But I didn’t know that then and I thanked him.” It was a four-day assignment which worked out to Rs 600, a huge bonus for the lad.

An excited SS went home to Patna and gifted his mother a saree – it was his first gift from his first earnings to the mother who had backed him unquestioningly. It didn’t matter that his first assignment in Bombay wouldn’t even figure in Wikipedia on his list of films.

“I laid the saree at my mother’s feet and gave the rest of the money to my parents,” he placed on record. “Giving your first salary to your parents is an indescribable feeling. It’s something which today’s generation does not follow,” he added.

When SS returned to Bombay, he swung by the King Brothers’ office to say ‘Thank you’, and the visit turned out to be fortuitous. An Englishman who was passing by, paused, gave him a second and then a third look. Perhaps he recognised him as the actor from *The Witness*. The Englishman was a film director called Allen Barren and, whatever the reason for his interest in SS, he offered him a dacoit’s role in his next film, *The Khandur Uprising*. An over-enthusiastic young SS grabbed the offer, and clinched it with a bit of straight-faced fibbing.

SS acknowledged that he had indeed uttered an untruth to seal the deal. “I was

offered the chance to play the lead role of a dacoit with a rider – I had to know horse riding. The truth was, I had never ridden even a donkey in my life but I pretended that it would pose no problem at all. Allen was so pleased that my fee went up to Rs 200 a day. I thanked him profusely. I had five days' work in this film and we went to Kashmir for the shooting. For the first time in my life, I flew by plane – I cannot ever forget the experience."

SS may have come a long way since the Rs 150 fee. But he didn't have a long or frustrating waiting period as work began to trickle in almost immediately after he emerged from FTII.

After his debut flight, SS also got his first taste of the good life when he shared a houseboat in Kashmir with renowned writer and theatre personality, Pandit Satyadev Dubey (who passed away in 2011).

"We had a wonderful time out there. I used to order two fried eggs every morning; there were no restrictions on eating and drinking. We got beer on location. So how can I ever be anti-America?" he questioned. "I also saw an air-conditioner for the first time."

The icing on the cake for the young man who was still footloose and fancy-free came in the form of a lady doctor with whom he quickly struck up a two-way exchange of affection. The lady rushed to his help when his lie came unstuck.

"It was great going until the first shot was to be taken – on horseback," winced SS. "The director said, 'Gallop, start with a trot, then gallop.' I had no idea what a trot or a gallop meant. He placed the camera in a vehicle and told me to follow it on horseback, holding a gun. Instead, I held the seat of the horse tight and wouldn't let go even when the director screamed, 'Leave it, leave it.' Then he said, 'Sit straight on the horse and aim your gun.' I tried to pull the trigger but there was no sound, and that's when he caught on that I had lied – I was no trained rider, no rider at all."

Even in this situation, the new actor who'd been caught out didn't cower or cringe but blustered his way out of it. "I fired three, four shots in the air and charged the director with abusing an Indian! I dramatised and politicised the whole thing," SS unabashedly confessed, revealing another early sign of a politician in him. "All the army men got angry and they too agreed that this was no way to talk to an Indian actor. Actually I was the one who was truly at fault," he remorsefully added. "But I chose to go for melodrama."

He continued to dramatise the situation much to the poor American's dismay.

“In the second shot, I had to run, take a leap and ride off on horseback. The running was fine until I made a big blunder. I should not have approached the horse from behind and startled it. But I did just that. I came from behind, kept my hand on the horse and jumped. The horse panicked, gave me a sound kick and I fell. I bruised my knee but the dramatics I indulged in exceeded the injury. The lady doctor proved very useful at this point. She started attending to me and that felt really good. She bandaged my bruise and recommended rest. The director was naturally upset at this and had to change the whole sequence. I was made to sit in a car because I was now the injured soldier. Finally, we came to the last shot. A trolley rehearsal took place at 5 pm on the last day. In about 2 minutes, the shot would have been over but the cameraman and his team came down from the trolley. They refused to shoot for even a minute after 5 pm and the one single shot was done the next day. By 9.30 the next morning, it was canned but I got paid an extra day’s fee of Rs 200.”

At FTII, horse riding and swimming were not on the curriculum. “With great difficulty, they taught us how to drive a car,” he snorted. The incident in Kashmir, however, prompted SS to clean up his act and add riding to his armour until he was at ease on horseback.

Television was practically unknown in India in the sixties but many actors could make a living with assignments like the Maya Series which was for MGM on American TV. It also helped that irrespective of the medium, word spread about the new boy with big expressive eyes and an impressive dialogue delivery.

It was a matter of pride for SS that his style of acting set off a series of me-toos which prompted another comment from him. “People from all over the world have copied me,” he said, “but to this day I have never copied anyone. I seem to have been a role model for many. But as far as I’m concerned, I’m still looking for my role model.”

The inspirations, however, were many and the several hands that helped him on his trek to stardom found a permanent place in his heart, one of whom was the genial Dev Anand. But there was more affection and respect for the Late actor-filmmaker than gratitude. As SS put it, “People said that Dev Anand gave me a break. It suited me to go along with that.”

The non-debatable point was that Dev Anand was extremely courteous to the unconventional-looking FTII-trained actor. “It was my great luck that Devsaab would talk to me with warmth and politeness,” acknowledged the star from Bihar. “He had a lot of style about him; it was intoxicating to be with him. You

automatically felt like going limp and talking like him.

“He offered me the very insignificant role of a Pakistani Colonel in *Prem Pujari* (1970). It was a tiny role but there was a particular shot in it where I threw a cigarette into my mouth with much flair. It caught the attention of many and I got noticed though it was only a very small part.”

Along with the difficult task of gaining recognition, SS had to grapple with the right name to flash across the screen. Today it seems unreal because he has made such a strong impact with his name. But the truth is, he was once known only as SP Sinha.

His name mutated quite a bit before he pinned it down to the heavy weight Shatrughan Sinha. “I had another small role of a police inspector in the Late Mohan Saigal’s Manoj Kumar-Asha Parekh starrer *Saajan* (1969). In both *Prem Pujari* and *Saajan* my name in the credit titles was SP Sinha. But I felt that it didn’t suit me, it sounded like a retired bureaucrat’s name. My name in college was ‘Shatrughna’ Prasad Sinha. People were finding ‘Shatrughna’ a tongue-twister. I dropped the surname Prasad to make it simpler and I changed my name to ‘Shatrughan’ which was easier to pronounce.”

Filmmaker Mani Kaul who had directed him to King Brothers for his first assignment, was instrumental in SS freezing his screen name as Shatrughan Sinha. He had helped SS see the wisdom in retaining his own name for the screen by raising the question, “If people can remember Richard Burton and Rock Hudson, why won’t they remember ‘Shatrughan’?” It was Mani Kaul who uttered the truism, “*Kaam chalega toh naam bhi chalega*”. If your work is accepted, your name will be too. It firmed up Sinha’s decision to go with the name he had been christened with.

Brother Bharat wondered if he also had a hand in SS’ decision. He said, “I was in medical college when Shatrughan came out of the Film Institute and talked about changing his name. It was a fashion with young people to think of a name-change. I remember telling him at that time, ‘Don’t ever change your name. A family of four brothers named Ram, Lakhan, Bharat and Shatrughan is so unique in this world, you won’t find another like us anywhere else. So never change your name.’ Maybe what I said got stuck somewhere in his memory.”

But it was a name that changed with the region where it was uttered. SS narrated with delight, “Punjabis would call me Shatrughanj like Paharganj or Daryaganj. Bengali friends would make it Shatrughno, like I was *Dr Noka bhai*. Gujaratis would turn it into Shatrujan Siyan. People in the North-East would call

me, Chatulgan Chinyah. South Indians would go, Shatrughnaa. My Sindhi mother-in-law would call me Shatrughun (rhyming with goon), '*Arre Shatrughun, ladki ka chakkar chhodo, itna bada actor ban gaya* (Stop chasing skirts, you've become a very popular actor today).'" SS' voice changed as he mimicked the different accents to perfection.

A tongue-twister for a name, fast-track dialogue delivery and dynamic screen presence led to the editor of *Stardust*, Shobha Rajyadhaksha (now Shobhaa De) and her colleague Uma Rao joining forces to coin the nickname 'Shotgun' for him. It stuck to Shatrughan for life.

But before the nicknames came from the media, he had to catch the eye of the people who mattered. As noted earlier, the few from Bihar like Bhagwan Sinha and Narayan Tiwari who had found some work in Hindi films were not really stellar names who could play godfather to a lanky youth from their home State.

"When I went to meet Mr Narayan Tiwari," recalled SS, "he thought I'd come like a tourist or a fan to see him shooting and said, 'Come in the afternoon, I'll be shooting with Dara Singh.' Actually he was in no position, unfortunately, to help anybody else. Then I met Chitraguptji, the great music director, also from Bihar. He was a thorough gentleman but it wasn't his time at the top either. Years later, when I made a film titled *Bihari Babu*, I went to Chitraguptji for the music. By then the shoe was on the other foot, I had become a star. But when I started out in Bombay, those who were already working here were themselves in no position to help anyone."

However, graduates from FTII watched out for one another. SS' senior, Mohan Kaviya introduced him to Gogi Anand who in turn took him to his uncle, Dev Anand. "When Devsaab gave me a role in *Prem Pujari*, I thought he would take me to London but my work was completed in one day in Nashik-Shirdi itself," chuckled SS.

He did all that strugglers of his time were wont to do. Pawan Kumar, SS' secretary of more than forty years who started taking care of the actor's professional career from 1969, would accompany him on his bus rides to the studios. "He would choose to sit right in front on the top deck where nobody who may recognise him would see him," remembered Pawan. "We'd take the bus to Worli and from there, a taxi to the studio gate."

Strugglers' tales had a charm of their own, especially in hindsight. SS remembered, "When we'd all sit together in the evenings, my friends would tell me, 'You don't have what it takes to be another Pran. Prem Chopra is very good

looking, so don't even try going there. If at all you make it, it will perhaps be in Joginder's category.' At this, somebody else would pipe up, 'But Joginder can at least do the *bhangra* (dance form of Punjab),' while another would say, 'Never mind, *isko acting toh aati hai,* he does know acting if nothing else!'" Thrown together by common desires, the sessions were thus a mixture of well-intentioned advice, hearty chuff-ups and cheeky put-downs.

The strugglers who met every day included Subhash Ghai, a senior from FTII. SS and Subhash Ghai shared a stormy equation that crossed four decades and swung from intimate bonding to complete intolerance of each other, with long periods of hanging in between the two extremes.

SS was extremely forthcoming about his friendship with Subhash Ghai which dated back to 1965. "Subhash was a senior who had passed out when I went to FTII but he would keep returning to the campus to meet Rehana in Poona. When they finally got married, I was well on my way to becoming a star. I had my own car by then, a Ford Consul with the number plate 315 (which added up to his favourite number 9) that earlier belonged to Sharmila Tagore. Maybe Sharmila was unaware of who had bought it but owning her car gave me a big thrill. It was in that car that Subhash set off for his wedding. He got married in filmmaker Atmaram's bungalow in the prestigious Juhu-Vile Parle Development Scheme (JVPD)." Atmaram (Guru Dutt's brother) had directed Subhash Ghai as an actor in *Umang* (1970) and lived in JVPD, the same starry area where SS later built his own sprawling bungalow, Ramayan.

"Under the chairmanship of Mr Subhash Ghai," declared SS, tongue firmly in his cheek, "I got introduced to all the *adda*s frequented by strugglers – *Minnie ka adda*, *Pascal ka adda*, *Aunty ka adda*. Those were the days of prohibition in Maharashtra and the local police would sometimes raid them. Bipin, Subhash Ghai, ace cameraman KK Mahajan and I were part of the same gang that met regularly and struggled together. Sometimes Javed Akhtar would join us. At one time I was to share a room with Javed Akhtar in Bandra but he turned me down because the rent was Rs 60 per person. He used to cough up that amount with great difficulty and he was afraid that if I didn't come up with my share, he would have to pay for me as well. So he said, 'No'. But all of us would meet.

"I was no drinker. It was Subhash Ghai who played a lead role in turning me into a drinker. We used to get feni from Goa for four annas, *dal vada* (Indian snack) to go with it for another four annas and Panama Wills cigarettes. I used to close my nose and drink because I couldn't really bear the smell. We would sit

and drink every evening."

Drink and network. Encouragement arrived for the scarred aspirant from several unlikely quarters, including the owner of an *adda*.

One day, SS was overjoyed to find his photograph on the sets of Dev Anand's film published in *Screen*, the film weekly. It called for a celebration but Pascal, the owner of a bar in Khar, had a different reception for his Bihari customer that evening. Pascal wouldn't accept money from SS that day and also told him, "Don't come here from today onwards." He generously offered to have his liquor delivered to the young actor wherever he wanted, advising him that an *adda* was no place for a rising star to frequent.

"I was extremely touched by his gesture and concern for my reputation and image," quipped SS. "Pascal told me that day, 'You will become a very major actor, there's a buzz about you.' I believe he had told Rajendra Kumar the same thing. When he told me that it wouldn't befit my status to be seen at his bar, I knew that this was a very genuine well-wisher. I never went to his bar again. As Pascal had foreseen, I did become a major star but for the next five years I didn't touch alcohol at all."

His respect for Pascal's call to stay away was also because SS himself was conscious of his status in society and cautious about not being caught in the wrong place or in dodgy company. A strong advocate of uncompromising behaviour by celebrities, he believed that since they made an impact as role models, their conduct had to always be way above reproach. It was a recurring thought in his narratives.

Just as he began smoking cigarettes because Raj Kapoor looked so heroic with his 555 pack, he narrated another incident that had left an impression on him way back in his school days. "I'd gone with Lakhan bhaiya to meet Prithviraj Kapoor at Hotel Pilani in Patna," said SS. "He was such an impressive-looking man, *gora-chitta*, wearing a silk *lungi* (unstitched lower garment), smoking a cigarette stylishly. He was Raj Kapoor's father to boot. I was watching him with awe when I overheard him talking about a child sitting nearby. He said that the child's parents had left him there saying, 'He doesn't study, doesn't do anything, take him to "Bambai" and make him an actor.' I heard Prithviraj Kapoor remark, 'Left to myself, I'd take the pants off such a child and *bum pe do chabuk maar deta* (plant two whiplashes across his bum).' My face fell in a second. The famous father of such a famous man, what kind of language was he using? I was so disillusioned that I didn't want to hang around any longer. When a man I

looked up to used words like ‘pants off’ and ‘*bum pe chabuk’*, I was shattered.”

He was disappointed enough to narrate the incident many years later to his senior friend, Dharmendra who was also known for his colourful Phagwara-style abuses.

“When Dharamji would start his, *‘Ben ki...’* (typical abuses involving mothers and sisters), I’d tell him, ‘You are admired as Dharmendraji. If you use language like this, won’t the person you are abusing be shattered the way I was when I heard Prithvirajji use crude Hindi words?’” SS’ argument would make the essentially good-natured Dharmendra stop mid-sentence and admit sheepishly, “*Arre yaar*, Shatru, you are right.”

“If you were to hear Atalji or Advaniji use street language like, ‘*Ay saala, do kaudi ke biddu* (You there, bloody worthless fella)’ or a four-letter word, won’t you be disillusioned?” questioned SS, as he went on to state, “I have always believed that a public figure must conduct himself in such a way that he lives up to people’s expectations. With due respect, when Nitin Gadkari was the BJP *adhyaksh* (President), he passed a remark about Lalu Prasad Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav and said, ‘*Kutte ki tarah talve chaatte hai* (They behave like dogs)’, which I found unpardonable. Ultimately he had to apologise for it but by then he had come down in many people’s esteem. The same Nitin Gadkari once also said, ‘Is Afzal Guru the *damaad* (son-in-law) of the Congress? Has the Congress given its daughter to Afzal Guru?’ I find such language despicable and strongly feel that it lowers your status before the public. When Sonia Gandhi said something much milder like ‘*Maut ke saudagar* (Merchants of death)’, there was such an uproar. One could actually have forgiven her for that lapse because her grasp over Hindi was so minimal.”

This was fortunately not the insincere posturing of a politician. Said FTII junior and close friend Shashi Ranjan, “Contrary to his image of being a motormouth, Sonu does not abuse even when he is amongst buddies. In all these years, the maximum he’ll come to using a swear word is by going ‘hmmm’. He can never bring himself to actually mouth a cuss word and he still does a double take when anyone is abusive in front of him.”

In his early days too, for all his swagger and notoriety, SS was never the abusive rowdy. Perhaps that was one of the traits that drew seniors to recommend him. His fluency with Bengali also helped him make friends in the right places. The otherwise egoistic Ritwik Ghatak would even visit him at home.

“Because I spoke in Bengali, Biswajeet also liked me and would take me around in his car. He thought I had it in me to make it big in films. That’s why when I became a star I did a Hindi film free of charge for him. I also did Manmohan Desai’s *Naami Chor* (1977) with Biswajeet where I came in only at interval point and still got a lot of applause.”

SS was childlike in recalling what a kick he got out of riding in fancy wheels with celebrities. “The first time I had the good fortune of riding in an Impala car which was a great status symbol back then was with Bharat Bhooshan. I would go with him in his Impala till his house after which his driver would drop me. But even if I had to go only a short distance and it was raining, I would tell the driver to leave me at Dadar Station just to get a longer ride in his car. It didn’t matter that it meant coming back by train, dripping wet.”

SS would also ride with Dev Anand in his Fiat, another reason to feel thrilled.

SS was still a small-timer but he was making his presence felt even when he appeared for a flash on screen. And he liked hanging out with the big fish.

“Once, I went with Dev Anand in his car to FTII and felt very privileged to go with him to my campus. On the drive to Poona, I was watching him keenly and was very amused when he wanted to empty his bladder en route. Such a big star but he needed to find a tree quickly. Ultimately, never mind the cars coming and going relentlessly, he just had to relieve himself!” As wife Promi pointed out earlier, toilet facilities were always a fetish with SS.

“At FTII, Devsaab delivered a lecture. I had got a part in *Prem Pujari* by then and I thought he would mention me in his speech. But Dev Anand was all about Dev Anand though I must admit that he spoke very well.”

Among the few names on his ‘Thank You’ list, there was only one heroine – perky, toffee-nosed Mumtaz.

Pawan Kumar underscored Mumtaz’s hand in his career. He remembered a Manmohan Desai film in which she was the heroine opposite Biswajeet, and Ratan Mohan was the producer. Her cousin Roopesh Kumar was keen to play the villain in it. But she put her foot down and rooted for ‘this new boy Shatrughan Sinha’, a decision that really cheesed off her cousin.

“It was a great honour to know Mumtaz,” said SS affectionately. “I was shooting for a Ramsay film called *Ek Nanhi Munni Ladki Thi* (1970) as the villain and Mumtaz was the heroine. I also had the privilege of working with two veterans in that film. One was Prithviraj Kapoor and the other was Jayant, Late

Amjad Khan's father."

At this point, SS made an important digression: "I must be the only actor who has acted with the maximum number of people; it must be another record that few can match. Right from Dilip Kumar to David Dhawan, from Ashok Kumar to Anil Dhawan, from Prithviraj Kapoor to Raj, Randhir, Rishi and Ranbir Kapoor, Babita and Neetu, from Nana Palsikar to Nana Patekar, from Balraj Sahni to Akshay Kumar, Leela Chitnis and Lalita Pawar, from Zeenat Aman to Zarina Wahab, Asha Bhosle to Asha Sachdeva via Asha Parekh, from Meena Kumari to Tina, Leena and Reena, from Jayant to Amjad and Imtiaz Khan, from Kanhaiyalal to Kishore Kumar, Keshav Rana to Keshto Mukherjee, from Salman and Shah Rukh to Saif Ali Khan, I have worked with them all. Even Amitabh Bachchan did not have the good fortune of working with Meena Kumari but I did in *Mere Apne*. I was lucky that I got to work with such a variety of people. I learnt a lot and picked up pointers from each of them. Jeevan and Pran were irreplaceable. How many have worked with Manoj Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Shammi Kapoor, Shashi Kapoor, Rajendra Kumar, Dharmendra and Jeetendra, besides Dilip Kumar and Dev Anand? I guess it merits a place in the *Limca Book of Records*."

Coming back to Mumtaz, SS claimed it was, "Love at first sight with a lot of affection."

"Mumtaz really appreciated my performance and behaviour. On the first day itself, she offered me a lift home; she had an open Buick or Impala. At that time I lived in the Krishna Kunj Lodge at Andheri but I was game to go all the way to Gobind Mahal on Marine Drive (in South Bombay) just to chat with her. She too had a great sense of humour and we chatted happily all the way to Marine Drive from Madh Island via Filmistan Studio. When we went to Poona for an outdoor shoot, Mumtaz presented me with a silk *lungi* and *kurta* (Indian clothes) which I wore very often. It gave me great pleasure to wear something that Mumtaz had gifted me. It saddens me that I don't know what happened to these after a few years."

The friendship lasted longer than the outfit. "We became so friendly that I could even go up to her bedroom. But let me make this very clear. It was a completely platonic, above-board friendship between two like-minded buddies. There was never anything romantic or sexual in this friendship but Mumtaz definitely went out of her way to help me in my career. This friendship, however, also cost me dearly when it came to doing movies with filmmakers like Yash

Chopra who was then said to be romantically involved with her. Mumtaz was so fond of me that we'd sit together, have lunch and chat in her bedroom. I got four films because of Mumtaz – *Pyaar Ka Rishta* (1973) with Sultan Ahmed, *Naami Chor* and *Shararat* (1972) with Biswajeet and Manmohan Desai respectively, and *Khilona* (1970) which was the turning point of my career."

Khilona was the film that set him off on the ride to stardom. But it was also the film which he nearly lost for a handful of reasons. "That's true," he confirmed, as he outlined the details. "I had actually been turned out of *Khilona*. I had great respect and affection for LV Prasadji (famous producer from the South) but they thought I would look too young in front of Mumtaz and Sanjeev Kumar. Agha Jaani Kashmiri, the writer, was in favour of taking me; he tried his best to support me. But it was Mumtaz who really pushed my name forward. Her cousin Roopesh Kumar was miffed because his sister was recommending my name so much. I returned dejected from my meeting with the producers of *Khilona* because I really wanted to do that role of a Bihari."

But it was a role that destiny had reserved for him. In fact, it was *Khilona* that gave birth to the film industry's Bihari Babu. The current Director General of Police Homeguard, Mumbai, Rakesh Maria's father was closely associated with Bhappi Sonie Productions, and he liked SS. Maria was a well-loved man who had a close friend in the production unit of *Khilona.* All of them pooled their contacts and wangled a call from LV Prasad for SS.

"I was still staying at Krishna Kunj Lodge in Andheri where six of us shared a room. I went from there to meet Prasadji and he confirmed that in a few days, they'd start shooting with me in the cast. *Uff*, I was flying, I was so excited to have bagged *Khilona* from LV Prasad! I did that role for about Rs 4,000. When I had worked for Rs 150 and Rs 200 per day, this was a big amount but it was an assignment I'd have done for any sum."

Being aboard, however, didn't necessarily translate into smooth filming. He stumbled on the very first day of shooting.

"Mumtaz was doing a *mujra* (dance form originating from courtesans in the Mughal era) at the end of which I had to say, '*Wah, wah*, Chand Bibi, *wah.'* For some reason, the 'Confidence, thy name is Shatrughan Sinha' swagger deserted me and I just couldn't bring myself to say something as simple as, '*Wah, wah'*. I think I was blanking out because everybody's focus was on me. It was unnerving for a newcomer to live up to expectations with everybody looking on with so much resentment and saying, '*Theek tarah bolo* (Say it properly).' Even the

make-up man said, '*Kahe ko ghabrata hai, arre theek bolo na* (Don't be so nervous, just deliver your line properly).' Lunch break was announced without a single shot canned. I was sure they'd drop me from the film. It was at this juncture that Mumtaz really spoke up for me. The Leo woman was at her fiery best when she ticked off everybody for putting so much pressure on me. She stood there saying, 'What's with all of you? Why is everybody directing him and pressurising him? Is this the way to treat a newcomer?' There was silence everywhere and my confidence returned with her support. We hugged each other with the glint of a tear in the eye and I finally gave the shot. I had been demoralised because there were so many people who didn't want me there," he repeated softly.

"Later on, Sanjeev Kumar, the hero of the film, became my one true friend for life. We did have a misunderstanding after a few years where we'd even stopped talking to each other. But once it was sorted out, we embraced each other and became such good friends that I believe, any understanding that comes after a misunderstanding lasts forever.

"Mumtaz helped me so much that she would even carry prints of my FTII film *And Unto The Void* to producers to show them my work. We didn't have videos or DVDs then, so she would carry these prints around. She showed it to so many producers – I shall always be indebted to her for it. But there was a lot of irresponsible, loose talk about us. It was totally untrue but was perhaps instrumental in my losing out on BR Chopra's *Ittefaq*. They were not getting Rajesh Khanna's dates and talks were on between the banner and me to do that role with Nanda. After I lost out on *Ittefaq*, I never got a chance to work with Mr BR Chopra or Nanda, although years later, I did get the opportunity to work with his brother Yash Chopra in *Kaala Patthar*.

"It was strange how I lost *Ittefaq*. We had a meal at BR Chopra's place, we talked of dates and everything was finalised when I heard from people that Yash Chopra didn't want me in the film. Losing that film proved the saying that there is many a slip between the cup and the lip because I had been finalised to do the role. I was heartbroken but I also found consolation in the fact that they had got Rajesh Khanna's dates. He was the reigning superstar and anybody would have preferred him to a newcomer like me."

The hurt lingered for a while and surfaced when BR Chopra offered him a plum role in *Dhund*.

"Call it naïveté or foolishness but because I was still miffed over losing

Ittefaq, I turned it down," SS explained flatly. "By then I had also started my journey as a leading man and *Dhund* turned out to be a great break for Danny who became a star with that film."

The misconstrued friendship with Mumtaz thus helped and harmed SS.

"Whatever the setbacks caused by the friendship, Mumtaz was undoubtedly of immense support to me," he maintained. "Before her marriage, she was keen that we do one film as hero-heroine which we hadn't done so far. There had been an offer for Rajkumar Kohli's *Naagin* but I couldn't do it. Nonetheless, many years later, after marriage and two children, when Mumtaz made a comeback to films with my close friend Pahlaj Nihalani's *Aandhiyaan*, she was very keen that I do the role of a politician opposite her, which of course I did.

"Once indebted, always indebted," he quipped. "So I'll always be indebted to Mumtaz and we are friends to this day. A few years ago, when she was in the early stages of breast cancer, I went to London and met her."

On her part, Mumtaz had the satisfaction of knowing that she had placed her faith in the right person because the unknown young actor she strongly recommended packed a punch even in inconsequential roles and made a positive impression everywhere he went. He began with one-day assignments in films like *Pyaar Hi Pyaar* and soon graduated to substantial parallel roles, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the same hero, Dharmendra.

"My kismet was brilliant," he remarked. "I was lucky to have made such an impact that even a reputed writer like MJ Akbar (currently Rajya Sabha MP and spokesperson for the BJP) told me, 'It was after watching you smoke stylishly in *Prem Pujari* that we started smoking cigarettes. And you've kicked the butt leaving us with the habit?' In *Pyaar Hi Pyaar*, Pran played a blackmailer but there was a twist in the tale where he began to be blackmailed by somebody else, which was me. I had to sit on a chair and talk over the phone. Surprisingly, this small scene got a lot of attention; a lot of people liked me in that shot and wondered who this new boy was."

It wasn't very long before he was recognised well enough for the lay person to start seeking his autograph. The first brush with such fame was imprinted in his memory.

"I was at Delhi airport when an airline official came running up to me, asking for an autograph. I looked behind to see whose autograph he was asking for and was pleasantly surprised when he said to me, 'I want your autograph; you were so good in *Pyaar Hi Pyaar*. One day you'll definitely become a very major star.'

I signed one of my first autographs that day. The airline official's name was Shambi. He's now well settled in Chandigarh and leads a happy life with his family. He became a friend and I have kept in touch with him to this day."

Signing an autograph was a big deal because, along with his dreams of stardom, SS had also been practising the perfect signature.

"A lot of people have found my autograph very artistic and flamboyant. But it didn't come about spontaneously," he disclosed. "I was struggling and wasn't getting *Khilona* but I was confident that I would make it as a star. So, sitting in my room in the Andheri lodge, I would endlessly practise my autograph. The autograph you see now was not born overnight. Many hours of labour and practise have gone into it."

On the journey to stardom, there were the customary heart-breaking rejections too but they didn't leave him thirsting for revenge. A certain producer who had paid him Rs 100 and then thrown him out of his film, returned a few years later to sign him as a hero opposite Zeenat Aman. "But I didn't hold a grudge against him because let's face it, he hadn't dropped me, he had thrown out an unknown newcomer. I took it as a question of demand and supply. Similarly, when he came to sign me on as a hero, he wasn't coming to me personally but to a star. And since the terms suited me, I did his film. By adopting this attitude, I managed not to harbour toxic feelings of revenge."

Pawan Kumar had an amusing story to share. While working in Ratan Mohan's film *Shararat* (1972), director Manmohan Desai told SS that he had recommended his name for another film he was making for producer Kamal Mehra and to drop in at the shooting to finalise the deal. "We went to Shree Sound Studio in Dadar where the shoot was on and three chairs were put out on the side of the set for us to talk to the producer who asked us what Sonu would charge as his fee. We were in a fix because we had no clue what to ask for, so we threw the ball in his court and said, 'You tell us what you're offering us,' while he insisted that we quote our price. Our dilemma was that Sonu was getting Rs 6,000 for the other film he was doing with Manmohan Desai. We were scared that if we quoted the same fee and this producer found it too high, we would lose the film. We just wouldn't talk of the fee until the producer finally gave up and said, 'Okay, I will give you Rs 20,000. Would that be all right?'"

"All right?" Pawan Kumar laughed as he recalled the incident. "It was more than all right and we grabbed the film. I've talked about this to show all that Sonu went through in his rise to the top."

SS' elephantine memory recorded the desperation and rejection he encountered on the way, episodes that added to his determination to succeed where others might have folded up and faded away. He remembered that all through the filming of *Mere Apne* where he finally walked away with accolades for his performance and dialogue delivery, he felt that Gulzar favoured the better-looking Vinod Khanna. One particular *maar-peet* (fight) sequence that he filmed for *Mere Apne* also lingered in his memory for another reason. He remembered that within a minute of the make-believe fight, Vinod Khanna and he were panting like they'd run a marathon. It stayed with him because in later years, the memory helped him kick the butt.

It wasn't Gulzar alone who was impressed with Vinod Khanna. Vinod Khanna's tall, broad-shouldered good looks and personality drew open admiration from close contender SS too who accepted with frankness, "There were three personalities I greatly admired after coming into films. One was Dharmendra who had come with Deven Verma to FTII. So good looking, red cheeks, fair complexion, hair blowing – I just kept looking at him. He was the first star I met in my life and I didn't know what to ask him. Imagine, I was tongue-tied before Dharmendra and when I finally found my voice I asked him, 'Which hair oil do you use?' Dharmendra looked at me and said, 'I don't apply oil in my hair.' There was an embarrassing silence before I asked him, 'On Sundays do you go to the races?' He looked at me again and replied, 'No'. After that I didn't have the courage to ask him anything else!

"Vinod Khanna was another person I admired greatly for his personality and the third was Kabir Bedi. Unfortunately, the kind of success that Kabir saw abroad with assignments like *Sandokan*, couldn't be replicated here and I always wondered why he didn't make it to the big league in Hindi cinema."

Making an impact in the humble roles that he was given, SS began to climb the charts and made a lot of friends on his way to the top. Anil Dhawan, who was two years junior to him at FTII, also became a very good friend. "I have seen Anil's brother, director David Dhawan practically grow up before me," SS stated.

FTII students had a way of standing up for one another, sometimes even stepping back to let the other be in the limelight. When filmmaker BR Ishara went to SS to cast him as the hero of *Chetna*, a runaway hit in its time, "I convinced BR Ishara that with my scar face, I wouldn't suit the role and introduced him to Anil Dhawan as a good alternative. Instead of playing the

hero, I did a 10-minute guest role in *Chetna* which became the highlight of the film."

Once again, it was a set of popular dialogues that firmed up his presence in the film. "If people remembered Rehana Sultan, the heroine of the film who was one year senior to me at FTII, and Anil Dhawan who was two years junior to me, they could not also forget Shatrughan Sinha in *Chetna*. My image as someone who could do wonders with dialogue delivery was established with *Chetna,*" he reported.

The story of a call girl caught the fancy of the public with huge posters that had an 'A' written between Rehana's long legs. One of SS' saucy lines in the film, "As the age of a girl goes up, her price comes tumbling down," became an instant hit and was repeated ad nauseam at stage shows and fan gatherings.

"'*Umar badti hai to daam ghadta hai bachche,*' became a very popular dialogue," SS reeled off. *Chetna* was one of the first few films that marked the enthusiasm of the audience for an unconventional new entrant who wrote his own rules of stardom.

"Even my entry in *Chetna,* where I stylishly disembarked from a plane, fetched a lot of applause," remembered SS, as he went on to narrate an incident that spotlighted his popularity. "Sudarshan Nag, the cinematographer of *Chetna*, was a good friend of mine from Himachal Pradesh. He later directed Rajinikanth and me in KC Bokadia's *Asli Naqli*. After *Chetna* was released, I had gone to visit Nag in Delhi and when I came out of his house, I found crowds milling around his place. I wondered who had arrived there when I was told that they had gathered to catch a glimpse of me. It was the *Chetna* effect."

SS had arrived and stardom was within grabbing distance.

Brother Lakhan who was headed westward to get a PhD in Mechanical Engineering in Texas, remembered the speed and intensity with which his popularity rose. "I was in Bombay in 1969, en route to America, when Sonu took me to Bandra Talkies to see *Saajan* where it was running for the tenth or twelfth week. Not many people recognised him.

"In 1972, *Raampur Ka Lakshman* was running in Houston, 90 miles from my University. I went to see it with a couple of friends and was pleasantly surprised when the audience began to clap on his mere entry. Even more surprisingly, somebody announced, we are happy to have his older brother Dr Lakhan Sinha with us and everybody said, 'Get up, get up.' When I got up, the whole audience clapped. That was when I realised how popular he had become."

Father BP Sinha who seemed outwardly miffed with his son's choice of career, also watched SS' climb with paternal pride. Brother Bharat disclosed, "Though my father was never a filmgoer, he saw *Prem Pujari* before anybody else in the family. Shatrughan had played a Pakistani colonel in it. Later, when one of our young relatives remarked that Shatrughan had played a sepoy very well, Baba was so angry that he retorted, 'You call a colonel a sepoy?' He had watched it so carefully. So in his own way he was also proud of Shatrughan."

"Three films played a very important role in making me the talk of the town," SS traced his trajectory. "One was *Chetna*. The other was a film that Dev Anand gave me as compensation for that tiny role in *Prem Pujari.* He cast me in *Gambler* (1971) which didn't do well but I got resounding claps for my dialogues and mannerisms. In fact, I stole the scene from Dev Anand for which the credit must go to him for having allowed it. I had a line that went, '*Mera haath jala hua hai*, Your Honour (My hand is burnt, Your Honour).' It was a vital piece of evidence with which I got Dev Anand freed from a murder charge in the film. Even during the shooting of that particular dialogue at Mehboob Studio, from the clapper boy onwards, everybody had applauded me. So I was certain that the public would also appreciate it. The third film that boosted my career and took me forward was *Khilona* (1970) directed by Chander Vora which really upped my popularity with girls. My dialogues like, '*Sharafat se mere saath Bambai bhaag chalo, top ki* heroine *bana doonga* (Come with me quietly to Bombay and I'll turn you into a top-selling heroine)', became so popular that for the first time, my face was on the banners along with Mumtaz and Sanjeev Kumar. With my hair tossed aside carelessly, I was up there on the hoardings. The songs of the film also went on to become chartbusters."

Soon, very soon, more films brought him even more popularity. Heads turned when he entered, his face brought a smile of recognition, even his unpronounceable name rolled off the tongue with more fluency. He was beginning to live the dream that had brought him from Patna to Bombay.

"Two other films put me firmly in the limelight," the narrative gained momentum. "*Bhai Ho To Aisa* (1972) and *Raampur Ka Lakshman* (1972) were films that fetched me unprecedented applause as the villain. In *BHTA*, when I drape a red shawl around me and go down on my knees to ask for forgiveness, or in the last scene in *RKL* when I tell the hero, '*Maa ko batana mat ki main hi hoon* (Don't let our mother know that I'm the culprit),' people would actually shed tears and sympathise with the villain. Midstream while shooting, director

Manmohan Desai had to change many scenes in both films because of public demand. People had started looking forward to seeing me on screen and he had to make suitable changes to cater to the growing demand for me. This was especially true with female fans and that prompted the Late Khushwant Singh, Editor of *The Illustrated Weekly Of India* to write, 'Shatrughan Sinha is the first villain in the history of Hindi cinema to have created a romantic aura around him.'"

It was strange indeed that a screen toughie was getting such an ovation from his public. Nikhil Kumar, retired Commissioner of Police, Delhi, former Governor of Nagaland, and an encyclopaedia on Hindi films, was an SP in Pondicherry (now Puducherry). In an effort to pick up Tamil, the police officer watched a lot of Tamil films and would, in the process, also catch up on the occasional Hindi film. He reported to SS that when he threw the line, "*Aaye toh keh dena Chhenu aaya tha* (If he turns up, tell him Chhenu had come for him)" in *Mere Apne,* the audience jumped up and gave SS a standing ovation, some literally standing on the chair or seat. The Tamil-speaking audience who didn't know Hindi, couldn't follow a word of what was going on in the film but for some inexplicable reason, they connected with the Bihari actor. Nikhil Kumar was stunned that a Hindi-spouting actor could have such an impact on the audience in the South. He was particularly proud that the actor came from his home State, Bihar.

Interestingly, SS himself had not attended the premiere of *Mere Apne* because he strongly believed that filmmaker Gulzar had favoured co-actor Vinod Khanna over him. Despite holding Gulzar in high regard, it was a feeling that persisted all his life. "It was not a misplaced feeling because Gulzar had done it at the cost of the film," SS defended his stand. "It was because of my own personality and my dialogue delivery that I still scored and walked away with equal honours, if not more. And I became a star after *Mere Apne*."

Another high-ranking police officer, Neeraj Kumar who was creatively involved with many projects of filmmaker Prakash Jha, and, therefore, understood cinema, also commented, "Astonishingly, Shatru Mama packed a wallop in South India even at the height of the anti-Hindi agitation in Tamil Nadu. Those were the days when the main film would be preceded by a newsreel or documentary, usually made or commissioned by Films Division of India. During the anti-Hindi riots, the short newsreel happened to be that of Randhir Kapoor's marriage to Babita, a glittering event where the topmost stars of Hindi

cinema arrived in style. The audience in Madras watched them all unmoved. But when Shatrughan Sinha stepped out of his car and made his entry, loud applause broke out and reverberated all around the hall with some front-benchers standing up and cheering. They gave him a standing ovation for merely entering a wedding. Shatrughan Sinha's impact was thus felt through the length and breadth of the country and wasn't restricted to Bihar.

"The remarkable feature of his success," Neeraj Kumar added, "was that it was entirely self-made. He exemplified optimism and stood for the fact that you could achieve anything on your own, that success didn't need a godfather."

SS' self-confidence also became legendary, spawning its own set of amusing stories. The former cop narrated one of them. "One of the stories that I heard about him many times over but which never failed to amuse me was about the time Rakesh Maria's father had come to his lodge and said, 'I want to meet Shatrughan Sinha.' Subhash Ghai was sent down to tell him, 'He's having a massage, you'll have to wait.'" Neeraj Kumar laughed at SS' audacity when he was a virtual non-entity. "His is a very unique life. To live life on your own terms and to succeed to such an extent is not an everyday story."

Stardom arrived but it took a while for it to sink in. "I was taken aback by the overwhelming reception, even a little afraid to acknowledge it," SS shared his feelings. "At the premiere of *Dost*, I went to the balcony and heard loud reactions from the audience which I mistook for hooting. There were tears in my eyes because I thought the film had flopped. I had changed my voice in the film – I was the first actor to do that by the way – and some people had made me nervous by asking me, 'What've they done to your voice? Or, is the sound quality bad?'"

Pause for a moment to understand that the remark about changing his voice was no off-the-cuff comment. It was a well-directed swipe at Amitabh Bachchan who, years later, changed his voice in *Agneepath*.

But to return to the premiere of *Dost*, it wasn't booing but cheering that was being heard in the hall. The unique phenomenon of applause for the villain was at work again. "It started with me and died with me," noted Shatrughan. "Even my friend Amjad Khan who was hailed as Gabbar Singh in *Sholay*, did not get the kind of applause I got as a villain. Incidentally, by the time *Sholay* was made, I had already become a star, so I didn't do the role of Gabbar Singh which was offered to me. Nor did I do the role that Amitabh eventually did in *Sholay* which had also come to me."

The villain getting applauded in film after film, set off a round of research studies in different universities. In the film industry, distributors were quick to pick up the vibes. When filmmaker SD Narang's *Babul Ki Galiyan* (1972) with Hema Malini and Sanjay Khan was released, the biggest cardboard standee that was displayed at the entrance of various theatres was that of the villain and not the lead pair. "If there was a 6 ft cut-out of Hema Malini, there was a 5 ft cut-out of Sanjay Khan and a 25 ft cut-out of mine with the line, 'Shotgun Sinha in *Babul Ki Galiyan*,'" SS smiled. "I was not the hero of the film. I was a mere villain with a price tag of only Rs 25,000 but was considered the main draw according to trade experts. All this was unheard of. The next time I worked with Hema Malini, I was her hero in the same filmmaker's *Do Thug* (1975)."

SS floated along the route charted for him by destiny, doing his job with infectious joy.

"None of what happened to me was planned," he accepted. "I had people asking me why I had turned a hero. There were also those who asked why I had become a villain in the first place if I wanted to be a hero. But none of this was in my hands; I just went with the flow. What I did was, I didn't treat a negative role as that of a routine villain but took it up as a character and stylised it. Living up to my maxim of, 'If not better, then be definitely different,' I brought mannerisms into every character. In *Raampur Ka Lakshman*, when I beat up someone, I looked at my watch to see if it was still running well. Nobody had done this before me. Rajinikanth did it years later. I had copied it from my own Institute film *An Angry Young Man* in which Jaya Bhaduri was the heroine and I, the hero."

It was a paradox that SS played the title role of 'Angry Young Man', an image that later got attached to his FTII co-star's husband, Amitabh Bachchan. The words 'Angry Young Man' are etched in Amitabh's resume, not SS'.

Whether SS should have moved from playing the villain so effectively to playing the male lead, was a debate that remained inconclusive. SS justified the move: "The thunderous applause that would greet my entry or my dialogue was heard by exhibitors (theatre owners) and conveyed to distributors. The distributors in turn conveyed it to producers and directors. And the same filmmakers who saw me only as a bad boy were compelled to accept me as a leading man. That's why, after destiny, I would give credit only to the audience for my success in films or in politics."

But there was also the harsh truth that despite hailing from FTII where he was

exposed to the best of world cinema, the training ground from where respected names like Mani Kaul and Adoor Gopalakrishnan emerged to make a name in award-winning arthouse cinema, SS was so swept away by commercial Hindi cinema that he remained more a star of the seventies than an actor respected for his craft. This charge had evidently crossed his mind too, as he was ready with an explanation for it.

He mused aloud, “There were reasons. The topmost one was that beggars can’t be choosers. The truth was, none of the art filmmakers offered me work the way commercial cinema did, just as commercial filmmakers didn’t offer anything to arthouse actors like Om Puri or Naseeruddin Shah. And let’s accept it, the charm of commercial cinema was always something else,” he declared without inhibition. “Whatever the route taken, ultimately every actor aspired for widespread commercial saleability. Commercial cinema accepted me wholeheartedly and made me such a big star that I never had the time to pause and put questions to myself. I, therefore, accept that I became a victim of the rat race.”

According to him, upgrading himself to the main slot in the rat race was simply a natural progression of events. By the time *Heera* (1973) and *Blackmail* (1973), his last two films as villain rolled along, distributors were demanding that his character be given some sort of redemption at the end. People had grown too fond of this villain to accept him as completely black.

“That’s true,” he nodded. “I was the first villain who was invited to Sophia College (an all-women’s college in South Mumbai) as their Chief Guest. I must be the first villain who was asked to solve women’s emotional problems in *Eve’s Weekly*, in an Agony Aunt sort of column. And I was the first villain over whom women fought; even heroines fought for my attention when we’d all be shooting in the same studio.”

The attention went to his head.

“I did get carried away with all this adulation,” he admitted. “A lot of big films came my way: *Sangram*, *Aadmi Sadak Ka*, *Kalicharan*, *Dost*, *Vishwanath*, *Samjhauta*, *Aa Gale Lag Ja*, *Dostana*, films with Manmohan Desai and Harmesh Malhotra who were the big commercial names of the seventies.”

He acceded, “I did regret somewhere deep within me that I wasn’t a part of parallel cinema. I had come here to become a good actor and it was necessary to do meaningful cinema too. But before I could establish myself as a very good actor, I became a very big star. However, you have to credit me for trying to

encourage good cinema in my own way whenever I got the opportunity to do it. That's why I did Goutam Ghose's *Antarjali Jatra* (1987)." SS had seen Ghose's much-applauded and much-awarded *Paar* (1984), an offbeat film that starred Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri, before he went on board for *Antarjali Jatra*.

Antarjali Jatra was his first foray into arthouse fare, twenty years after passing out of FTII in 1967. SS was still a saleable commercial star when he did this low-budget, non-mainstream film in which he played a *chandal* (low-born), an outcast working at a crematorium. It was the sort of role that would normally have been offered to Om Puri or Naseeruddin Shah, the staple names that upheld the morale of parallel cinema.

At first, SS was actually diffident about pulling it off. The 'Angry Young Man' of FTII had disappeared in the haze of commercial adulation. "My confidence had gone for a toss and I was on the verge of returning from the location," he accepted with characteristic honesty. "When I saw the reality of art cinema, that I would have to be this bare-bodied *chandal*, I felt I couldn't do it. Ultimately I did it and got a Grand Prix too, for it. But when I first reported for the shooting of *Antarjali Jatra*, I lost my nerve. For the first time in my career, I was unprofessional. Instead of shooting in the cool climate of Kashmir (which I'd got used to in commercial cinema), here I was in the 48° heat of Bengal's Sagar Deep, that too in a low-budget art film which did not permit pampering its actors. I couldn't perform in those conditions. People started saying, 'Send for Om Puri or Naseeruddin Shah'. My co-stars were Rabi Ghosh, the comedian, and Basant Choudhury, a big actor from Bengal."

Ultimately, the magic of Goutam Ghose prevailed as he stood his ground. He had conceived the role with Shatrughan Sinha in mind, visualising his walk, his gait, his eyes and his body. The filmmaker explained to SS, "Getting Om Puri will be a cliché. To have Shatrughan Sinha in the role of a *chandal* will be interesting."

SS wanted to go home and even suggested that Gautam face the camera and do the role himself. "But once the shooting started, there was no going back," SS conceded. "I was sold on the role and became a *chandal* for the next few weeks. I remain indebted to Goutam Ghose for believing that I could do it and for convincing me to stay put and do it."

That one honest tryst with the camera in a realistic film like *Antarjali Yatra* led SS back to his FTII roots and he followed it up with *Kasba* (1991), a film

with Kumar Shahani, and a repeat act with Goutam Ghose (*Patang* with Shabana Azmi in 1994). These films did not work miracles for his bank balance or bring him mass adulation. But they helped him touch base with himself as an actor. “I do think that a good actor must do art films *riyaaz ke liye*, as a practice session.”

He added wistfully, “Either they feared my stardom or they’d heard stories about me. But it was my misfortune that filmmakers like Shyam Benegal never approached me. Or they were not allowed near me,” he rued with the wisdom of hindsight.

SS even produced an art film in 1983. He called the film *Kalka* and based it on the exploitation of coal miners of Dhanbad by a powerful combine of the local mafia, the management and the trade unions. Lok Sen Lalwani, an internationally acclaimed documentary filmmaker who had won several awards, was signed as director. SS was determined to make this earthy and off-the-commercial-beat. “It was a film against the mafia but shot in the heart of the mafia lands,” he smirked. He could do that, walk into the lion’s den as it were because even the mafia saw Hindi films and Shatrughan Sinha was the pride of Bihar. Nobody would dare harm him...or his cast and crew.

He exhaled with satisfaction, “The Chief Minister of Bihar, Shri Jagannath Mishra had very kindly declared us as State guests, put a plane at our disposal and had the whole State machinery watch over us. But the so-called mafia also supported me because I was their Bihari Babu. Once, when the director needed a *tamancha* or a *katta* (a pistol or a sharp, axe-like instrument) for one scene but couldn’t procure one, PTI flashed the news that the Bihari Babu couldn’t get a *tamancha* for his shooting. The moment they heard it, many people stepped forward and offered us eighteen *tamancha*s!”

SS referred to the goons who controlled the coal mines as the ‘so-called mafia’, not committing himself to branding them. “They came and asked us if we were making a film against the mafia,” he remembered. “We said, ‘No, we’re making a film against the system.’ They didn’t quite understand the word ‘system’ but were okay about it. Then they asked me why the government had to give us so much security. They said, ‘You are our Bihari Babu, you don’t need security, not even a strand of your hair will be touched, just go ahead and shoot here without fear.’ They had only one request. They told me to make the film I wanted but to also listen to their side of the story. ‘*Hamra sideva bhi sun le*.’ It was really very gracious of them and we could film *Kalka* without any untoward incident. Even on the days when there was some miscommunication and the

police couldn’t be there on time, we went ahead and shot our film with a crowd of 50,000 looking on.”

Kalka didn’t fare well at the box-office but fetched its makers a lot of critical acclaim and got a tax-exemption in many States. SS starred in it too, along with Raj Babbar, Sarika and Rekha Sahay, a theatre actress who later married Sinha’s close friend, Congress leader Subodh Kant Sahay.

Those occasional forays outside his comfort zone satisfied the actor in him but it was soon back to business on the commercial circuit. It took SS another decade to step out of complacent stardom and return to another medium that had given him immense satisfaction in his unspoiled FTII days. Could he, a Hindi film star used to retakes and cuts, do an entire act on stage before a live audience? He tested himself in 2002 when he returned to theatre to do a play.

“I thought it was time to test my skills on stage and so I did *Pati Patni Aur Main*, a humorous theatre play with Rakesh Bedi and Bhavna Balsavar as my splendid co-stars. Before I went into it, I gave it a lot of thought and decided that the stage was the most important platform for any actor. For the discipline, for the voice culture, for the range and for the performance, doing theatre was like a workshop. Fortunately, the Dhoots of Videocon supported me unstintingly when they came in as sponsors. We did the play with tickets and without, and it was one of the biggest hits on stage. I also contributed to it with my one-liners and punchlines. Ramesh Talwar directed it well, Sanjay Goradia, a good actor and theatre producer, gave the play a professional touch. I did *Pati Patni Aur Main* as a learning experience. Just as I did art films for a better grasp of my craft, I grabbed the play as a refresher course.”

His audience cut across party lines and social delineations. It was the only play to have been watched by Prime Ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh. The latter’s wife Gursharan Kaur later remarked that it was one of those rare moments when she saw her husband actually laugh. From Sonia Gandhi to Jyoti Basu, AK Anthony and SM Krishna to Farooq Abdullah, from Vilasrao Deshmukh and Lalu Prasad Yadav to Sushma Swaraj who saw it four times and Yashwant Sinha who went a fifth time, from Madhavrao Scindia and Bhairon Singh Shekhawat to Kalyan Singh and Rajnath Singh, from artist MF Husain and actors Dilip Kumar and Anil Kapoor to Shah Rukh Khan, Madhuri Dixit and Govinda, every show was packed with big names.

The fact that he didn’t experience stage fright was one part of the story. Pulling off a stage play was easy also because remembering lines was SS’ forte,

a quality that the film industry was well acquainted with. His colleagues soon began to label him the fastest dubbing actor in Hindi cinema who also had clarity of pronunciation and perfect diction.

SS' gift was amply displayed one day when Amitabh Bachchan and he had a tense moment during *Dostana*.

"My make-up man Pratap had died tragically, so I had not reported for shooting," SS explained. "But I had to shoot the next day because the set was to be dismantled after that. The producer, Yash Johar, had requested me to come early because Amitabh was going out of town and had to leave at 2 pm sharp. It was already noon and I hadn't reported for work. Yashji called several times to say that Amitabh had been waiting since morning. Zeenat Aman was there, Raj Khosla the director was waiting, there was a big set waiting for me. By the time I reached, it was nearly 1 pm. By the time I greeted everybody it was 1.15. By the time a bit of touch-up on the face was done, it was 1.30. I did my make-up and listened to the long dialogue simultaneously. It was a long scene of about 350 feet, one of the highlights of the film. The dialogue was a seven or eight-pager, I hadn't even touched it. I stood where I had to, the director said, 'Start sound,' and at 1.35 pm the shot started. Everybody said that I had caused tension on the set because I had turned up late and Amitabh had to leave at 2. But I said, they had all made me tense because they didn't give me enough time for a rehearsal. Anyway, I started my dialogue, I was in a space of my own in my head and it was only when there was a thunderous applause at Mehboob Studio that I came out of it and realised I had given an almost perfect shot. There were tears in the anxious director Raj Khosla's eyes as he remarked, '*Koi karke dikhaye* (Let's see anyone else try it).' To be very fair to Amitabh, he hugged me and said, 'What a beautiful shot.' I was all set for another take. It was 1.45 by then. I repeated the shot but halfway through it, Amitabh stopped me and said, 'That was your best shot, now forget it.'"

It was one of the countless times when long dialogues running into several pages were like putty in his hands. There was a method he applied which, along with his natural abilities, gave him that much-envied memory.

"I don't concentrate on the grammar," SS parted with a tip. "I look at the content, what does the scene say? Scene *ka arth kya hai*? Once you grasp that, because you already have a command over the language, you don't encounter a problem. That's why I concentrate on the content, then I look at the words and see where exactly the commas are, and my confidence takes me through it. It is

the clarity of what the scene is about that is paramount in dialogue delivery. I guess that's how the very proficient Amitabh Bachchan also goes about his dubbing."

Goutam Ghose had set aside ten days for SS' dubbing because he was a non-Bengali who was spouting colloquial Bengali in the film. But SS took only one day to dub for any film. For *Vishwanath*, he had gone into the dubbing theatre at BR Films around 9 pm and completed the entire film by 1.30 am.

"The memory power is in my genes. And the concentration comes from practising yoga," he explained. "I would once again suggest to young actors that for confidence, for relaxation and for concentration, yoga and meditation are very vital."

He explained what had turned him into a regular practitioner of the therapeutic regimen.

"In the seventies, I used to suffer from low blood pressure," he unveiled a largely unspoken part of his life. "Whether I slept at 4 am and woke up at 10 am, or whether I slept at 10 pm and woke up at 6 am, I would wake up tired all the time. I used to smoke a packet of cigarettes during the day. Wherever I went, I would ask someone at the studio to massage my back or my feet or my shoulders. I would eat and want to sleep again. This was early in my stardom, just after *Kalicharan* when I was doing films like *Do Shatru* (1980). That was my condition when I was also doing *Kranti* (1981). My producer-director and co-actor Manoj Kumar knew a bit about Medical Science and understood what was happening to me. He caringly took me to Dr Mukesh Batra, a homeopath. I don't really have great faith in homoeopathy nor do I have much knowledge of it. In fact, I'm pretty cynical about it because God knows how many frauds and quacks there are in the name of homeopathy. But I needed help. I used to joke that most of my heroines were leaving me because instead of romancing them I would be asking them to massage my back and my feet!

"At Dr Batra's, once I learnt that I had a low blood pressure problem, the fighting spirit in me surfaced. Way back during *Mere Apne*, I had become aware of the harmful effects of smoking after the way Vinod Khanna and I had been panting one minute into an action shot.

"Vinod Khanna probably smoked more than me but he was also physically much stronger than me. When I saw him panting, it struck me that if in our youth, our stamina was ebbing like this, then smoking and tobacco would turn out to be eventual killers. At that time itself, I had subconsciously begun

working towards giving it up. Thanks to my *yog shakti* (strength built up through yoga) and discipline, I could quit smoking in later years without picking up any other habit.

"Yoga," he expounded, "is the reason why, despite my strenuous schedule which includes acting, two Cabinet berths and several terms as an MP, through all the stress and strain of life, even today, 90% of the time my blood pressure is as good as that of a twelve-year-old child. It is a steady 120/80."

How he kicked the butt was once again a lesson in determination and firm resolve.

"I was not a heavy smoker but," he said in self-admonishment, "like a woman can either be pregnant or not pregnant, she cannot be slightly pregnant, you are either a smoker or a non-smoker. There are no in-betweens. When I decided to give up smoking, I was fortunate to get some really good yoga teachers including the Late BKS Iyengar. With a variety of *asana*s (postures) like *padmasan*, *seershashan*, *vajrasan* (names of yoga postures*)*, taking in water from one nostril, taking it out from another, I went to a very high degree of yoga. I would drink almost fourteen glasses of water and take it out. Today I am not as regular as I once was but thirty years of intense yoga has helped me all my life. Yoga not only cured me of my low blood pressure problem but also calmed me, cooled me down. It helped my memory a lot, *seershashan* (head-stand) in particular, was a big help. Through meditation and breathing exercises, my grasping power went up. Yoga curbs short temper; a cool head helps you think better, handle stress better. Over the years, I have become a man who doesn't shout, doesn't lose his temper. I don't use four-letter words or abusive language. I would credit yoga for all of this because it took the stress out of my system."

Henry, his make-up man of nearly three decades, stood witness to his master's equanimity as he revealed, "I returned to work with him because of his nature. Once, I had reported drunk for work and that was the only time Sir was annoyed. But even then he didn't shout at me, he only made me understand that what I was doing was wrong."

Before this fount of goodness was carried too far, it was imperative to revisit that scene with Amitabh Bachchan in *Dostana* when SS fetched up late but delivered a seven-page dialogue at one go. SS may have reeled it off without rehearsal. But there was another side to the coin: many of his colleagues pointed to this very scene (and many like it) as examples of SS' misplaced complacence.

Since acting, dialogue delivery, charisma, stardom and the ability to rattle off

long pages of lines, came to him easily, he was content with merely meeting a deadline. It was a sad case of not building a lasting edifice as he didn't put any effort into taking his performances, indeed his acting career itself, to a much higher level, for he took his work far too casually, waylaid by the perks of stardom.

Unlike every other person around him who fanned his flaws and repeated only what he wanted to hear, there was a singular lack of sycophancy in Pawan Kumar, SS' secretary of more than forty years.

"According to me," Pawan Kumar said with complete forthrightness, "Sonu's biggest career-mistake was to turn hero. I did not agree then and I maintain to this day that he should have remained a villain. Are good villains not given their respectful place in society?" he argued. "Sonu had an unheard-of appeal and unique status as a villain which he could not replicate as hero. As a villain he worked with the biggest and best of 'A' teams. But as a hero, he got only the second-grade stuff. I do think he would have had a unique place in the history of Hindi cinema if he had stuck to what he was so good at."

Equally bluntly, Pawan Kumar didn't mince his words when he said, "His wanting to become a hero combined with his chronic latecoming worked against his reaching the heights he could have as an actor." That perceived lack of dedication was a failing which prevented SS from rewriting the history of Hindi cinema, pointed out Pawan Kumar.

SS himself introspected, "Perhaps it's true that I got carried away. But there are a lot of films where you don't have to exhibit great acting, you are signed on only for your name, your presence is all that's required. It happens to all of us.

"A lot of Dharmendra's films, many of Jeetendra's films or many of mine, were made only to cash in on our popularity. Your memory and your confidence carry you through it. But I won't accept the cliché that Shatrughan Sinha is Shatrughan Sinha in every film," he said obstinately. "Amitabh Bachchan is also Amitabh Bachchan in every film; Aamir Khan is also Aamir Khan in every film; Shah Rukh Khan is also the same in every Shah Rukh Khan film. You saw Charlie Chaplin too, only as Charlie Chaplin in every film or Raj Kapoor as RK in every film with only a fractional difference in some places.

"There are only a few films which need gravitas, and your intensity can be seen in them. Like Amitabh Bachchan's superlative performance in *Black*. It made me once again acknowledge him as a very superior actor. You saw my acting in films like *Kalicharan*, in *Gautam Govinda*, in *Vishwanath*, in *Antarjali*

Jatra. You can't expect that kind of intense performance in a Harmesh Malhotra or Kewal Mishra or Rajkumar Kohli film. I'm not putting them down; they have all been friends of mine. We're talking about their kind of cinema. For that matter, the performance you got from Amitabh Bachchan in *Sholay*, was certainly not what you got in *Shaan*. I am no exception. I got carried away in terms of stardom, in terms of rat race, in terms of glamour, thanks to my weakness and my desire for the good things in life. It was also because I got the goodies too soon on a platter. It took barely a year-and-a-half for recognition to come my way."

There are many, including close friends like Salim Khan and Subhash Ghai who watched him go up and down the ladder, and felt disappointed that SS didn't allow himself to grow as an actor.

But he did strike out elsewhere, outside his safe corner in the film industry when he made the journey from film star to star politician. His first foray into politics was way back in 1975 when Indira Gandhi's Emergency was clamped with a gag order on the freedom of press and other liberties granted under the Constitution of India. SS had emerged from his starry Juhu-Vile Parle bungalow in 1977 to join seniors like Dev Anand and Vijay Anand in raising a collective voice against the Emergency on the platform of the hastily cobbled National Party which succeeded in temporarily pulling down Indira Gandhi's Government. Most of his colleagues returned to the studios, SS was hooked.

"I wanted to remain a star and use my stardom as a platform for social and political work," he traced the roots of his new career. "I began to look for a party that would contribute to the building of society. Whether its moves were right or wrong, its intentions had to be honorable. After giving it deep thought, I started meeting a few key people. I started meeting RSS stalwart, the Late Nanaji Deshmukh. I started listening to Jayaprakash Narayan. I heard him remark that those who went into politics after retiring from films were good people but they were only the second best. The best were those who came in when they were still energetic, still keen and eager to do something, they were the people who could contribute more. People like Jawaharlal Nehru and Gandhi had left behind their silver spoon existence and gone into public life. I wouldn't even begin to compare myself with any of them but Jayaprakash Narayan's words influenced me deeply. It dawned on me that if I had to enter public life, it had to be now and not when I had retired from the film industry. Perhaps that's why people take me more seriously even though I am from the film industry, especially the North

Indian film industry. They've seen my courage, my consistency, my character and my transparency. In all these years, there has never been any allegation or even an FIR lodged against me. People could see that out of the entire film industry all over the country, I was the only person who thought of social responsibility and joined the BJP. It was not the party in power; nobody joined the BJP at that time. I got a lot of encouragement from Jayaprakash Narayan to step into politics at that juncture. When Jayaprakash Narayan was hospitalised at Jaslok, I used to go and meet him, sometimes with Manoj Kumar also, and chat with him in Bhojpuri.

"I would also go and meet Ramnath Goenka at Express Towers. Nanaji Deshmukh would come to my house. Ram Jethmalani became a friend and remained one forever. When Atal Bihari Vajpayee's adopted daughter was getting married, he personally came over to invite me. Because I had to catch an 9 pm flight, he said, 'We'll have the reception at 7.' We attended the reception, went to the airport and caught the flight. All those meetings and friendships played a big part in deciding which way to head in politics."

But there was a dichotomy there. Despite being a fierce opponent of the Emergency, SS was eager to befriend the high offices of the Prime Minister herself and began to visit Indira Gandhi. In fact, he was awestruck enough to be tongue-tied before her.

"During the Emergency, I met Indira Gandhi," he admitted and cockily added, "As usual, I reached late for my meeting with her. There I was sitting in a British India library kind of atmosphere with hushed whispers around me that asked, 'How come you've come now when Madam gave you an appointment for 10 o'clock? It's 10.20!' I said, 'Let Madam know I've come, and please check if she can meet me.' It was the time Justice Jagmohanlal Sinha had declared her election invalid (1975) and I had sent him a congratulatory message. She was calling different groups of people to gauge how they felt about the Emergency. She had also called Nargis and Sunil Dutt.

"In my entire life, I was never as nervous as I was that day when I went in to meet her. The moment she got up and welcomed me, there was no coordination between one line and the other that I uttered. I talked gibberish. Ultimately, I said, 'Madam, I've become very nervous,' and I asked her for a glass of water which she graciously gave me herself. She was good at mimicry I believe, and I later heard that she used to mimic how I had behaved with her that day. We had a nice long meeting. One thing that struck me was – what a star she is. I still

maintain that of all the Prime Ministers I have met and with due respect to Atalji, Manmohanji and Modiji, Mrs Gandhi was the true star. I was fascinated with her."

He admitted that he was fascinated enough to have even followed her into her party notwithstanding the wide gap in their ideological leanings. Besotted after that first meeting, SS went visiting the PMO every time he got a chance. Fortunately for him, Indira Gandhi's Personal Secretary, the formidable RK Dhawan was willing to entertain his requests.

"Every time I met her, she would extend the time allotted to me and keep talking to me. Perhaps both of us had won each other over," he injected wishfully into the narrative. "I found not only motherly warmth in her but also a father's disciplinary distance. That's why I call her the biggest star ever. Once, I was so stupid that on my way from Patna when I had only four hours in Delhi, I called up Dhawansaab and asked if I could come and meet her. He asked me, which month do you want to meet her, and I said, now. He remarked, '*Bihari hai toh Bihari hi rahega* (Once a Bihari, always a Bihari)' but I remember she did call me the same evening at 6 pm. I was at Akbar Hotel and I was surrounded by so many girls who wouldn't leave me that when I went over it was nearly 7 pm. I was told that she had waited till 6.30 and left. That was one time I missed her but there were many more meetings thereafter. I would go and meet her even on a Sunday when she normally wouldn't meet anyone. Videos had come in recently and she was quite childlike as she said, 'Oh, I've forgotten to put off the video. I'll go and put it off.' Once there was a rustling noise in the room and I said, 'It's nothing Madam, just a leaf that's fallen.' This was just after Operation Blue Star. But she was so inquisitive, she was saying, 'I hope it's not a lizard. How could a lizard have come in?' I was fortunate to have seen the child in her.

"She would say that I could do a lot. She had some vision, some plan for me. I'd even discussed Operation Blue Star with her."

It was Operation Blue Star that finally felled her in 1984. Not only would the history of India have changed if Mrs Gandhi had survived the assassination attempt but SS' political career would have too. Unmindful of how it would sound to his own party, the actor-politician, known to march to a beat of his own, dropped discretion and confessed, "If Madam Gandhi had survived, despite my being against the Emergency, the way she gave me so much affection and placed such faith in me, perhaps I would have joined the Congress."

Whatever his decisions, whether to make a transition from villain to hero or

which political party to align with, the one steadfast companion who stood by him, irrespective of the circumstances, was the beautiful young girl he had seen in the train to Bombay.

3

Meeting And Marrying Miss India Poonam Chandiramani

No relationship is all sunshine but two people can share one umbrella and survive the storm together.

Anon

In 1965, as soon as SS boarded the train at Patna and stowed away his luggage, he was struck by the most beautiful face he had ever seen either on screen or in life. Sitting in front of him was Poonam Chandiramani who would one day become his wife, Mrs Poonam Sinha.

“I had never seen such a beautiful face in my life,” SS went back in time, acknowledging that it was unreal and dramatic. “Nobody would believe such a filmi story but it happened to us. She had come to Patna for a distant relative’s marriage and was returning to Bombay by the same train that I had boarded, in the very same compartment. She was in a skirt, still in school, and I was later called a cradle-snatcher by my friends. There was a portly lady by her side – it was her aunty and my future mother-in-law. There was also a man sitting with

them, perhaps a cousin. Promi was looking out of the window but she saw me enter. There were requests made by others in the compartment for me to change my seat but my friends whispered to me, '*Mat change karna, mat change karna* (Don't change your seat), such a pretty girl.' She was a school kid with two plaits. I was conscious of her and I kept nudging my friends not to annoy her family. It was a two-day journey and I told them, 'You'll go away and I'll have to face the music with her people.'

"I remember everything about that first glimpse I had of Promi. The date was June 27, 1965. Her aunty who brought her up thought I was a very decent boy while I was secretly and totally floored by Promi's beauty. I noticed that she was crying. She was a pampered child and her aunty must've scolded her for some childish antics.

"So there she was, crying softly and here I was, also crying at leaving my house. Both of us were sitting there opposite each other, each crying for a different reason." He succumbed to a tempting wisecrack: "It's another matter that after marriage and three kids, we are still crying. The location and time frame have changed but the situation is the same."

The fear and tears at leaving home and Amma were soon replaced by unfamiliar stirrings in him at the vision before him. He chuckled, "Those days, there was a very popular Hindi film magazine called *Madhuri*. For the first time in my life, I wrote a filmi dialogue, '*Itni sundar chehre pe aankhon mein aansoo achche nahin lagte, rona nahin* (Tears don't look nice on such a beautiful face, don't cry)', put it into the magazine and handed it to her. I thought she would find the gesture that of a true hero but she flung the magazine out of the window."

Unfazed, he took even that as a positive sign and the two-day train ride sped by with ecstasy submerging all other emotions. "It was good enough for me that at least she had not complained to her aunty," he smiled. "I felt like I'd got a small consolation prize. Watching such a beautiful girl fast asleep really fascinated me. The train passed through six or seven tunnels. I had romantic notions of touching her, giving her a hug, pulling her towards me. In the third tunnel, I brushed against her foot and that was enough to give me a thrill and goosebumps. But all of a sudden I was struck by some quick flashbacks."

A few episodes from his unruly life in Patna cautioned him to exercise restraint. He replayed them: "I once sent a love letter to a girl in the neighbourhood. She gave it to her mother who showed it to my mother and slam,

I got one smack across my face from Amma. That wasn't the only time I got a few *thappad*s (slaps) from my mother. On another occasion, I'd gone to a neighbour's terrace to look at a girl. I wanted to do something hero-like. The girl used to talk to me comfortably, so I thought I'd won her over. I went to her terrace and while distracting her with some talk, I gave her a quick peck on the cheek. I didn't dare to kiss her on the lips. I did that and quickly returned home and watched her reaction. I watched as she started complaining about me to her people. She was shocked that I could do this to her. Her people were in a quandary over how to handle it because my family had a very good reputation. So finally, they came and told my mother about it. I got slap No 2 that day.

"Another slap I remember was the one I got for opening the bag of a lady who'd come to our house dressed in a beautiful white saree. I was a child and curious to know what was in her bag. I got a resounding slap No 3 for that. I was told that one should never open or look into a lady's bag. The impact of that slap has remained with me to this day. Forget any other lady's handbag, to date I have never looked into even Promi's or Sonakshi's bag."

All those slaps for his misadventures with the opposite sex flashed by as the train made its way through the tunnels. He said sheepishly, "The flashbacks stopped me from going anywhere close to Promi but as the tunnels sped by, I knew that my chances of ever touching her were getting dimmer and dimmer. Finally, when we entered the last tunnel, I touched her feet quickly and ran inside the bathroom. Of course, she had no clue that I'd touched her. I told her about it much later in life. It was also a very foolhardy thing to have done because if her aunty had seen it, my life would've been over before I reached FTII. But I think by the time we reached Kalyan (a far-flung suburb of Mumbai), Promi had sensed that this guy was trying to get fresh with her. "

When the train pulled up at Kalyan, SS had to alight to catch another train to Poona while Promi and her aunt carried on to Bombay. At this juncture, his filmi leanings came to the fore again.

"I was confident that before I vanished from view, she would turn and give me one last look like they do in the movies," he unabashedly admitted. "But she must've been inspired by the song, 'Mudh Mudh Ke Na Dekh Mudh Mudh Ke (Don't look back)' because not once did she turn to look at me while I must've looked back a hundred times hoping to catch her looking at me. That was a huge disappointment for me although she later told me that she had looked at me."

The serendipity did not end there. Her formidable aunt had thought him

decent enough to part with their address in Bombay, asking him to drop by and meet them.

"Our meeting this way when I was beginning a new chapter in my life, was all a part of my destiny," he mused. "Pandit Vishnu Kant Jha's prophecy had described my future wife in perfect detail. He had said, 'G*ori ka gol chehra, poonam ke chand ki tarah, iski biwi sabse sundar hogi* (With the face of a full moon, his wife will be the most beautiful one).'"

SS now had twin reasons to look forward to his life in Maharashtra. One was his passion for cinema, the ardent desire to be famous, to be a film star. And the other was this new unplanned love interest whom he had to woo and win.

It was difficult not to keep track of Poonam Chandiramani whose beauty won her a Miss India crown and set her off on a sparkling career as a fashion model. Moreover, SS had her address. When she became a celebrity, he was still an unknown entity.

"We remained in touch, so I knew when she won the beauty pageant. We also had common friends," he explained. "I stayed with Lakhan bhaiya's friend Bipin, and Promi also stayed in Chembur. Her folks and Bipin's people got talking and she learnt about the family I came from. When Promi became Miss India, it was all over the papers. Those days, becoming a beauty queen was quite a craze unlike today when beauty queens are a dime-a-dozen, like awards functions," he sniffed with pride.

Everything about Bombay made the boy from Patna go wide-eyed. And there was the stunning girl in the train he had to visit.

"I went to meet Aunty but as luck would have it, Promi had gone out," he recalled his disappointment. "Aunty, however, greeted me warmly and was very hospitable. I later heard that when Promi came back, she felt very bad she had missed meeting me. Once, when I went to a studio in Andheri as a struggler along with Mehmood's younger brother Anwar Ali, there was a big crowd gathered there. It was the *mahurat* (the auspicious start to a new venture) of a film; the media was there in full attendance. It was the *mahurat* of Promi's film. I was a part of the milling crowd when a lady brushed against me and said, 'I'm very sorry.' We turned around and faced each other and it was Promi! When she saw it was me, she said, 'Oh, it's you. *Aap kab aaye* (When did you turn up)?' It was quite a big deal then for the heroine of the film to be talking to a struggler so nicely. It really lit me up, it made my day and I could sense the positive vibrations between us."

Poonam took the screen name Komal and did several films like *Jigri Dost* (1969) opposite Jeetendra. It was she who tasted fame before SS but it was he alone who had stars in his eyes and a dream-target to reach. Poonam was largely unambitious and not driven by career-goals to succeed at any cost. It suited the conservative Bihari who considered it a qualification. “Promi was never very keen on an acting career,” he said. “Her aunty had no children of her own and had adopted Promi who was her brother’s daughter. She took special care of her, treated her like a flower, and was very strict with her. I haven’t seen any star-mother or guardian chaperone a girl so vigilantly.”

When despite her hawk-like presence, it finally dawned on Aunty that the young man she had trusted had entirely different ideas about her niece, she actually felt betrayed.

SS nodded, “When she realised that it was getting serious and was not a platonic friendship, she felt as if I had stabbed her in the back because she had trusted me. After that, whenever she met me, she wouldn’t be looking at Promi but would sit before me and look me straight in the eye. It would promptly shame me.” Shame him but not stop him; meeting her on the sly was an excitement the young man could not resist.

“Promi and I had started meeting occasionally,” he went on. “I started getting a few films. And then came a film called *Dharti Ki God Mein* (1971) in which both Promi and I acted. It was directed by Kewal Mishra who later made a very big box-office hit with Vinod Khanna and me called *Do Yaar* (1972).”

It was during the making of *Dharti Ki God Mein* that the friendship blossomed. “While doing her make-up, she would see me in the mirror and our eyes would lock. She would give me a slight smile,” he recalled. “And then we went to Agra for a shooting schedule. She was the heroine of the film, Sunil Dutt’s brother Som Dutt was the hero and I was the villain. While shooting, the crowds got unruly; there was a lot of stone throwing and chaos and in this mêlée, she and I got locked together in a bathroom!”

In the confusion where Promi’s protection was paramount, her aunt could do nothing to stop the two from being thrown together unexpectedly. Of course, they made the most of it. “We talked in whispers and for the first time I felt an unsaid, unspoken chemistry between us. It was fleeting but it was there. I wasn’t imagining it any longer.”

The shooting progressed. They got closer and made common friends. There was Superintendent of Police, Bhanot in Agra. Bhanot’s daughter Usha became a

huge fan of the actor and then of ‘Poonam didi’ too. The others sensed what was brewing between the heroine and the villain but Aunty had not caught on. She was quite happy to have all of them travel in the same car from the hotel to the location, and had no reservations about SS going over to their room for a chat. But it was all under her watchful eye; meeting alone was never under consideration.

“When we shifted location to Delhi, what was happening between us slowly got exposed,” said SS. “It was like the proverbial 1,000 violins playing in the background.” Poonam’s formidable aunt could no longer remain impervious to what was brewing between them and she was not willing to play along. “She became even stricter thereafter,” winced SS.

“I was becoming more and more popular but Aunty was adamant that Promi and I should not be thrown together again,” he continued. “For example, when the film *Paras* (1971) was offered to her, the moment her aunt got to know that I was also in it, she turned it down. It turned out to be a blockbuster and Farida Jalal who did that role won a Filmfare Award for it. But Aunty had decided that I was a bad influence on Promi, so irrespective of the money being offered, she said a firm ‘No’ to working in any film with me.”

The embargo couldn’t stop the young suitor from wooing his lady.

“We tried to talk, to meet. But Aunty put a stop to all communication. Telephone calls were never given to her. Her aunty would tell her that there were good proposals coming her way, to choose from them and settle down. Promi was getting proposals from very prominent Sindhi families. For a long time, we couldn’t meet at all. Imagine, we hadn’t even got around to holding hands and our relationship was already getting nipped in the bud!”

Like cinematic romances, there were side players who pitched in and helped the lead pair meet furtively. “Promi had a helpful maid called Zubeida and through her, we would try and meet. Promi’s cousin Sunita (now Sunita Ruparel, still very close to us) and a friend called Pushpa (now Mona Narang, a close friend to this day), ferried letters to and fro or told us when we could catch a glimpse of each other.” The roster of close allies also included actors Asrani, Paintal, Subhash Ghai, Amitabh Bachchan, sometimes Anwar Ali, and friends like Yogi from Patna and Bipin Upadhyaya who had shared the same room with SS in the lodge in Andheri.

There was also a telephone operator from MTNL who would listen in on their conversations and became very friendly with SS. But later, when the star began

to draw away from Promi, the same operator switched sides. “She would fill me in on all his extra-curricular activities,” Promi gleefully recollected.

The additional excitement was that SS’ popularity was on the rise and he was gaining so much recognition that they had to be even more careful not to be spotted in public.

In 1971, during the Indo-Pak War when curfew and blackout had been declared, SS and Promi had one of their more daring dates. A message had been sent to her that he would be going over to her place at night. “My friends and I had decided to go in a car and meet her. We’d also decided that if we got caught, we’d run away and get married in court.”

Looking back, SS couldn’t believe their naïveté. “We had no idea how to go about a court marriage or where we’d stay the night. And I’d set out like a great warrior. My supporter and adviser that evening was my former FTII tutor, Asrani Sir. Bipin, Yogi and a few more buddies were with me. We were full of *himmat* and *josh* (confidence and youthful energy), brimming over with bravado. None of us were drunk, by the way.

“Promi who had spent the whole day oiling the latch so it wouldn’t creak, had told her grandmother about our meeting. But when the time came, the grandmother chickened out and decided that she wanted no part in this. She turned her back on Promi and went to sleep. It must’ve been about 1 am when we reached her house. We parked the car; she saw me from the balcony. We went up to the first floor and she opened the door very nervously. But this was her way of reassuring me that it was not one-sided and that she had faith in me. If we’d been caught, *bahut joote padte* (there’d have been hell to pay). I had no idea what to say to her, what to do with her, how much to hold her, how far to go. But what happened that night was, the series of slaps which had begun with my mother came a full circle with a slap I got from my future wife! It was more of an affectionate tap on the cheek for keeping her waiting and not moving forward. Fortunately, it was also the first and last slap I got from her.

“After she slapped me, we conversed, whispering in each other’s ear. I assured her that things would work out for us, that I had started working. I’d slowly started making a name for myself. We made plans. The romance continued through letters.

“That night I fortunately returned in one piece and still single after visiting Promi. So we didn’t have to run away or have a court marriage or indeed, get married that day.”

As Promi and SS grew closer, now assured of each other's love, his career began to soar. "After films like *Chetna* (1970), *Khilona* (1970), *Gambler* (1971), *Raampur Ka Lakshman* (1972) and *Bhai Ho To Aisa* (1972), were released, people had started recognising me. I became popular with the young crowd. We still managed to meet surreptitiously." Again, perhaps thoroughly influenced by his passion for cinema, his romance with Promi also took on filmi tones. "I'd hide my face and slip into Aurora Talkies where she'd somehow cajole her uncle into bringing her. I'd wear dark glasses or specs, walk with a droop or with a limp to avoid recognition and go into the theatre with Yogi or Bipin to spend a few minutes with her. We watched *Sound Of Music*, one of the few films in that period which I saw till the end because of her presence.

"Simultaneously, my status in life changed from struggling actor to a star you could no longer ignore. I had started life in Bombay from Krishna Kunj Lodge where five or six of us shared a room. All the others thought I'd become an actor one day so I was given the privilege of the window seat – a bed by the window. Soon I shifted to a two-bedroom flat in Lalubhai Park in Andheri. It was given to me free of charge by my helpful friend Trilokinath Parashar. As my popularity grew, I moved to a one-room flat in Anthony Mansion on 29th Road in Bandra on a rent of Rs 200 per month. A lot of letters from Promi were delivered to my flat in Anthony Mansion by Zubeida and others." One unforgettable letter had come at a critical moment when he was wondering how to pay his rent of Rs 200. And voilà, immediately after Promi's letter, there arrived a packet from a producer with Rs 3000 in it for a film!

"It proved again how lucky she was for me," he remarked. "From there, my next big step was to Devdoot in Bandstand where I saw the really dizzy heights of stardom."

Moving into Devdoot was one of his biggest achievements for he had coveted the flat from a distance for many years.

"An actress called Zeb Rehman used to stay in this two-bedroom flat in Devdoot," he remembered. "On the ground floor lived BK Adarsh, Founder-Editor of *Trade Guide*. Dr Rahi Masoom Raza, the writer of *Mahabharat* lived on the first floor. He grew very fond of me and was like a guardian figure to me. There was a college of Architecture which had its hostel in Bandstand where Taj Lands End now stands. I often stayed there as a guest paying Re 1 per night. From that hostel, I used to look up at this flat in Devdoot and dream of living there one day. Fortunately for me, Zeb Rehman moved out of that flat and an

extremely decent Parsi gentleman who owned it, gave it to me for a monthly rent of Rs 800. It was a wonderful flat. I felt very proud and happy to move into it. I felt I had arrived, I felt I had come home. Fortunately, today I own that flat too.

"It felt so wonderful to live there. From every room you could see the sea. There was no need for an air-conditioner because it was so breezy and beautiful. We put in an air-conditioner much later. I lived in that rented flat when I did all my famous films. *Khilona* (1970), *Mere Apne* (1971), *Dost* (1974), *Kalicharan* (1976), were all shot while I lived there. It was considered a very lucky flat for me and everybody said I had to buy it. The owner had no intentions of selling it but he was really decent and as a special case, he let me buy it from him. When I'd taken it on rent from him, I'd made it clear that forget a written agreement, the day he wanted me to vacate it, I'd move out. I've always wanted above-board dealings where I can look a person in the eye anytime in life. He appreciated that quality in me which was why when I later wanted to buy it, he sold it to me.

"When I took it on rent I did often wonder how I'd manage Rs 800 every month to pay the rent. To go from a rent of Rs 200 to Rs 800 was a big jump. To top it, a broker had taken most of my money and absconded. But it was the place from where my career really took off. For the first time in my life, I saw lakhs of rupees coming into my house. It was here that I signed *Gaai Aur Gori* (1973); Mr Chinappa Devar had come to that flat to sign me up. It had created waves then because it was said that the full and final amount that Rajesh Khanna had been paid for the colossal hit *Haathi Mere Saathi* (1971), was what I got only as signing amount. Big-time filmmakers like Manmohan Desai, Dulal Guha came to that house to sign me up. It was only after *Kalicharan* that I bought my bungalow in Juhu which I named Ramayan.

"But for a good two years, I kept going back to Devdoot. I couldn't bring myself to really leave it. My wife and family used to call it Shatrughan Sinha's *Mazar-e-Mohabbat* (mausoleum of love like the Taj Mahal).

"By the time I settled down in Devdoot, I had sent my brother Ram bhaiya and NN Sippy, a Sindhi producer who made runaway hits like *Woh Kaun Thi*, with a marriage proposal to Promi's aunty. Aunty had thrown it out saying, 'Look at your brother and look at my daughter. She is so fair and beautiful that even if they posed for a colour photograph, he will come out in black and white!'"

What Aunty didn't reckon with but Promi feared with the instinct of a woman

in love, was that the constant spurning of his proposal would drive him into the arms of a proliferating number of admirers. And she was right. Devdoot was not only the apartment where commercial success and big-ticket filmmakers entered in abundance, it was also the bachelor's pad for many a 'heroic' tale.

SS' coterie watched with growing excitement his rising score both as a film star and as a wild young man. Along with the film offers and the lucre, they kept track of the willowy figures that weaved in and out of his life. At one time, his cronies even opened an A-Z account – every time SS scored with an admirer, the alphabet with which her name began would be ticked off. The goal was to tick off all 26 alphabets and if the endeavour had to be aborted, it was not due to lack of numbers but because they were stumped by the alphabet 'X'. No one interesting enough whose name began with 'X' ever came within their purview.

The image-conscious politician of today would probably dissociate himself from such boisterous adventures. But in the incorrigible seventies, score cards and swapping of stories were *de rigueur* with young men.

Promi sure had much to worry about.

SS admitted with his normal candour, "As I began to taste big-time success, other girls came into my life. Perhaps I had a small-town mentality. I also had an inferiority complex about my scarred face. After getting slapped and scolded, here I was with girls of all kinds, co-stars, girls from good families, socialites, models, company executives. They were all ready and willing to have a scene with me. I wasn't into casual flings but I did go a bit berserk."

The one giveaway of where his ultimate loyalties lay was that only Promi's name reached Bhuvaneshwar Niwas.

"He had told his mother all about Promi," squealed Annapurna, "and when I went to Patna, he told me too about her. He showered so much praise on her, paid her so many compliments and said, 'She is too good for me' so many times that we looked forward to meeting her. I still have the long, long letters that Promi would write to me those days. It was not the era of leisurely and daily phone calls, hardly anybody made calls all over the country then. So all our communication was through letters."

Further proof of which way he would eventually head surfaced when he sent Annapurna into a tizzy over a gift for Promi. "When he was returning to Bombay from Patna, he casually asked me, 'Do you want to send her anything?' We had no idea what the film industry was like. So I went to the shop and got a very beautiful silver set with filigree work from Cuttack, very elegant. He looked

at it, cast it aside and said, ‘When you go home, give it to your Dai (old maid).’

“I was in a dilemma; all my jewellery was at my in-laws’ place. I had only one small ring with me, a very old one with a butterfly on it. I gave that to him and he happily took it for Promi.” Poonam has it with her to this day.

So while the other girls flitted in and out, his heart truly beat only for Promi. And their love story unexpectedly took a favourable turn when FTII buddy and actor Anil Dhawan got married to fellow actor Rashmi.

SS met Promi and her family at the reception at Sun-n-Sand and Aunty was impressed that despite his obvious popularity, he made time to look after them. It was *mere yaar ki shaadi* (my buddy’s wedding) and SS was the *de facto* host. But when it was time for them to leave, he personally drove Promi and her aunt back to Chembur in his car. He now had his own vehicle too.

“That was the beginning of Aunty thawing towards me,” SS remembered. “But Aunty was also getting swayed by rumours about my growing number of girlfriends. To an extent, there was some truth to the stories.”

Perhaps to check out the territory before she yielded her niece to it, one day Promi and her aunt paid a surprise visit to his bachelor’s pad in Devdoot.

“It was more like a surprise raid,” he mock-trembled. “As luck would have it, I was sitting inside with a girl. She was only a friend, nothing more, but *meri jaan nikal gayi* (I was caught completely off-guard). All of a sudden, to have Aunty there when there was a girl inside the flat was unthinkable. We passed her off as a neighbour who’d dropped in to use the phone. Luckily, Promi played along in front of Aunty and saved the day although I had to pay for it later when we met alone.

“From then on, everything simply grew and grew. Promi and I were going strong. My career took off brilliantly. My stardom was on the rise and along with all that dizzy success, my craze for a few new things also grew. It was natural. I had come from a small town, small compared to Bombay, and I began to get a bit carried away with all the attention. One of the reasons was also because I couldn’t really meet Promi alone. Here I was getting all the attention any man would want and on the other hand, whenever I met Promi, it would be in front of everybody else. If we went for a drive, her whole *khandaan* (clan) would be with us. We got no privacy at all. For the first time after five years, I got to hold her hand, that too inside a theatre when we were watching Subhash Ghai’s film, *Umang (*1970). As always, we had to make elaborate plans to meet there. I informed her that we’d be going to see this film and she had to work on her

uncle and coax him into bringing her to the theatre. Holding her hand in the theatre felt like an electric current. During the interval, before the lights came on, I slipped away.

“Promi was still doing films but going slow with her career, being very picky. A lot of people felt she should become an air hostess but her family was against it. She did films only to buy time. The craze for SS was going stronger; night life and parties came with it. There was no anchor for me at home since Promi couldn’t be with me openly.”

For five years after stardom hit him, SS did not touch a drop of liquor.

“I wasn’t much of a drinker,” he explained. “It was much later when Sanjeev Kumar became a close friend or when I had Subhash Ghai’s company that I really started drinking but certainly never heavily. Of course, I don’t blame either of them for my developing a taste for alcohol.”

It wasn’t alcohol but success that he found heady.

“I got carried away with company, stardom and attention,” he admitted. “It was natural that with a bit of flirting you start getting intimate with the opposite sex. I was called ‘cocktail eyes’, ‘bedroom eyes’, ‘Shotgun’, ‘lady killer’ – a lot of epithets were used for me but no matter what people said, the fact was, I never was a womaniser, I don’t even like using the word. I was certainly not a bed-hopper. I always believed that respect was a must in any relationship.”

However, once Aunty relented and came around to accepting the relationship, it was no longer mandatory that she would be sitting between them every time they met. “Promi and I would go on the terrace at Ramayan and talk for hours on end.”

Aunty also allowed Poonam to act in *Sabak* (1973) which starred Shatrughan Sinha.

But now the shoe was firmly on the other foot.

Poonam had put her career and popularity on the backburner to turn herself into the ultimate woman for SS. But he who had too many distractions in his life, particularly a co-star by the name Reena Roy, was no longer the one-woman man who wanted Ms Chandiramani at any cost.

Overtures began to be made by Aunty to take the romance to the next level but the prospective groom had tasted blood. And caught between them was Poonam who faced what she had feared – he officially called it off just when Aunty had been completely won over.

He may have snapped ties with her temporarily but his family in Bihar didn't follow suit. "We felt very bad when Sonu and Promi didn't talk to each other for years," Annapurna frowned. "I stayed in touch with her all the time. We were keen to see them married.

"I can't ever forget the first time I saw her!" exclaimed Annapurna as if she'd seen a vision. "We had come to stay at Ramayan and Promi was shooting in Nepal for Dev Anand's *Ishk, Ishk, Ishk* (1974). Through Pawanji, with great difficulty, we contacted her and asked her to come down. She came in a white saree with her aunty and when she got down from a Fiat car, I got my first glimpse of her. I just stood and looked at her, she looked so ethereal, so beautiful, so fragile, I thought she would be blemished if I touched her. We tried very hard to get them together and after that Sonu and she began talking again."

Like all the people who had sized up SS, Annapurna too read him right when she observed, "Promi has always had such a special place in his life that he could never bear one word against her. Sonu won't tolerate it even if the children have a fight with their mummy. He has the *ravaiya* (style) of an old-world zamindar about his woman, *agar inka bal bhi baanka hua toh baukhla jaate hain* (He won't allow any harm to come to her). Even when they were not talking to each other, he continued that one trait of being ultra-protective of her." It was a dead giveaway that whatever the issues between them, he was serious only about Poonam.

"But we couldn't comprehend what was going on in his life in Bombay. We would hear that he had gone astray but everybody would also tell us, 'The film line is like that,'" Annapurna shrugged.

"I broke off with Promi during *Sabak*," SS said crisply. "I told her simply that she was too good for me, she deserved better, to please leave me alone. In every area, she was just perfect. Everything she did was to please me. She moulded her whole life to suit me. I couldn't believe this sort of dedication. Once Aunty came around, she started expecting me to give her more time, more attention which I could not give her." More than attention, she naturally wanted his complete fidelity which SS could no longer give his lady.

Confirming that he had strayed from the fold and put Poonam's unwavering loyalty to the test, SS disclosed, "There was no communication at all between us for about three years but much later I came to know that she had kept tabs on me. She would call my house and talk to the staff, ensure that I was being looked after well in her absence. She would make blank calls to me; she'd hear my

voice over the phone and gauge my mood of the day. She was very intuitive and the vibrations were strong. She used to cry a lot, lost weight, became a vegetarian and turned to God."

His midnight dates, those furtive touches in a darkened cinema hall and the desire to take her home receded into the background as SS grew close to Reena Roy, the heroine of *Kalicharan*, his first runaway hit as a hero.

"That's true," he accepted. "I became very close to my heroine. I will always be guilty of having put Promi through a lot of trauma at that time."

He didn't just abruptly end his relationship with Poonam, he even gave her grief when they were shooting for *Sabak*.

He rued, "When we'd stopped talking during *Sabak*, I refused to shoot 'Barkha Rani...,' a super hit song of those times, with Promi. It was, therefore, picturised on Jayshree T and another actor called Abhijeet. But after the film was released, Jugal Kishore, one of the finest human beings I have ever met, requested us to shoot the song together. If you ever watch the song, you'll find only some parts picturised on Promi and me although we were the lead pair. To this day, the song has Jayshree T and Abhijeet in the interludes.

"Jugal Kishore was such a good human being and a perfect producer that on the 10th day of every month, he would pay me my instalment. Even if I forgot about it, he would turn up on the 10th to make the payment. I agreed to shoot the song which was such a chartbuster but all through the shoot, Promi and I never spoke a word to each other. But I admired the way Promi remained graceful through it all and never gave me any cause for stress or complaint. She didn't embarrass me at any time or try to force a conversation between us.

"By the time we got around to shooting the song, things had worsened between us. I didn't want to face her anymore. My mother and my sister were contacted and they were with me when we shot the song in a single day at Jugal Kishoreji's farm."

Their break-up would have been permanent if it hadn't been for Poonam's dogged determination to walk down the aisle with this man alone. Beautiful, eligible and considered a premium catch in her community, Poonam was inundated with proposals from illustrious Sindhi families. But she stood her ground. Once, when her family had insisted on her meeting one of these eligible candidates, she had broken a plate over her own head, stamped her foot and refused to look beyond the boy from Patna.

“She was determined that she would marry only me,” said SS, flattered that a woman he had chased and desired had devoted her whole life to him, and him alone. “It was as if the day she opened her eyes, she saw me and was hooked, booked and cooked for life,” the pleasure evident in his voice. “She did everything to be my ideal partner. Today when I see a cookery show on TV or read about a master chef, I can proudly say that there is nobody to beat Promi. Once she knew that I was a foodie, she started learning to cook and became a pro at it. Chinese, Italian, Bihari, Bengali fish curry, diet food, high-protein diet, combination foods, she mastered it all. Nobody could stand up to her. She had turned vegetarian temporarily but she cooked mutton, chicken, whatever I fancied. Her aunt was also a great cook.”

He appreciated it three decades later but swept away by stardom and the attention showered upon him by a bevy of girls topped by co-star Reena Roy, he had no clue what Poonam was up to. He later learnt that she had stayed in touch with his mother who had also decided that this was the devoted wife her son really needed.

The film world was witness to the silent battle between the two women most prominent in his life. At one time when Poonam sported a diamond ‘S’ stud on her nose, Reena Roy stepped out wearing shades that had SS inscribed on both sides!

This kind of blatant affection, where each literally wore her love on her nose or over her ears, chuffed the man who was caught between them. Like Dharmendra-Hema Malini and other saleable screen couples, SS and Reena Roy also signed a slew of films and lived in bliss. But Poonam was not one to back off without a fight.

“I didn’t know that Promi was still in touch with my mother,” said SS. “I didn’t know that she was still calling up every day and telling the staff what to make for me, ensuring that I was being taken care of. I didn’t know that just like her maid Zubeida, one of my staffers was also helping her and keeping her informed about me.”

By now the action had shifted from Devdoot to Ramayan, the dream bungalow he had built and named as a tribute to his family.

In 1980, Shyama Devi decided that it was time to rein in her wayward son. SS knew his game was up when he awoke one morning to find Poonam in an off-white saree and her aunty in white entering Ramayan. His mother was in the city, staying with him.

“It was about 11 am when I saw them going in to meet Amma,” he vividly described the day. “The door shut and they were closeted there for the whole day. I knew my goose was cooked and I couldn’t escape a face-off anymore. They came out at 7 pm; all day I’d been watching the door. When they came out, neither Promi nor her aunty embarrassed me in any way. But one look at her swollen eyes and I knew, ‘*Beta Shatru, tu to gaya* (You’ve had it).’ I went in and fought with my mother, asking her not to interfere in my life. But when she demanded to know, ‘Too good for me *ka kya matlab*? What do you mean by, she’s too good for me?’ I was cornered.

“Also, when I saw Promi inside Ramayan, I knew that she was still the special one. I still cared very deeply for her.”

But there were too many women in his life for him to decide upon only one. He remarked light-heartedly, “My problem was not whom to marry but whom not to marry!

“It was not only a certain actress who had entered my life,” he disclosed. Like comic book hero Archie who bought ‘You’re the only one’ cards by the dozen for each of his ‘steady’ girlfriends on Valentine’s Day, SS was unabashedly ‘going steady’ with more than one girl simultaneously. The list tumbled out. “I was also going steady with a tall, very well-educated corporate executive who was a South Indian Brahmin, another short little girl who is now married. I had many friends then. I have been very fortunate that most of my girlfriends were very fine young ladies. What all of them had in common was that they were willing to let me go if I was leaving them to marry Promi. To this day, some of them have remained unmarried,” he added. Their single status seemed to make him feel a couple of inches taller.

After his mother had led him by the ear, he sheepishly asked Promi, “Despite knowing all that’s happening in my life, will you marry me?”

She didn’t give in on the spot. A romantic scene had to take place and it did. He smiled affectionately, “To her eternal credit, she kept her dignity by replying, ‘I’ll give you an answer if you propose to me properly’. Finally, on the terrace of Ramayan I proposed to her conventionally, on bent knee, with a rose in my hand.”

One is not sure about the other women in his life but for Reena Roy, it was a wrench. Shatrughan Sinha and Reena Roy were a popular, celebrity couple and everybody had accepted their off-screen intimacy. So when he chose to openly wed Poonam, it was a humiliating public rejection for Reena Roy. But she too,

accepted his marriage without kicking up a ruckus. “She was very gracious,” said SS. “She said, ‘If it’s Promi, it’s okay. Anybody else and I’ll kill you.’”

Reena Roy had no choice but to be graceful about it especially since she and her man were still commercially in demand. Besides, he continued to stay in the relationship with her despite the change in his marital status. It was a reality that Poonam had accepted when she became his wife. In fact, while Bipin, Subhash and all his close friends were distributing his wedding invitation to guests in India, SS and Reena Roy were together in London doing a stage show. “Yes, I wasn’t even around for the wedding preparations,” he accepted.

Two days before he wed Poonam, he was on a London stage with Reena when Kalyanji-Anandji made an announcement that Shatrughan Sinha was going back to India the next day to get married. Reena stood by his side publicly while the bride who knew just what was unfolding in London waited for her big moment in Bombay. In this very dramatic triangle, both women stood by him with Reena Roy even driving with him to Heathrow to see him off – the ultimate ego boost for a man.

But if SS expected Reena Roy to continue being devoted to him despite his marriage to another, he was in for a surprise. “After my marriage I could see her battling confusion,” he revealed. “Sometimes she would fly off to the Rajneesh ashram, sometimes stay over with someone in America. She wouldn’t talk to me for days. I could not give her the position that she felt she deserved. I couldn’t do anything about it.”

If he couldn’t, she could. Reena Roy found cricketer Mohsin Khan from across the border and married him before she could change her mind. That move hurt everybody around, including her man in Bombay. For she had not only married a good-looking, eligible bachelor with a name of his own but she had also done the unthinkable – crossed over to Pakistan for domesticity.

Unfortunately for Reena Roy, the *nikah* (Muslim marriage) on the rebound didn’t last even an innings and she returned to Bombay a single woman. It was rumoured that in her later battle for the custody of her daughter Jannat, it was her former lover who helped her. Jannat was finally brought to India and Reena changed her name to Sanam.

If SS had a hand in Jannat’s return to her mother, he was circumspect about it. “I don’t believe in kiss-n-tell stories,” he said seriously, the flamboyance vanishing. “To this day I think of her with respect and affection because she gave me a lot of comfort, calm and peace when I was going through the dilemma of

my marriage. I will forever remain obliged to her for that. Whenever we meet, it is with dignity."

SS' friend Dr Upendra Sinha explained how the actor had made up his mind. "He told me, Reena loves me but Promi worships me."

For the occasion, Mahmood Alam, SS' friend in Patna who had factories in Firozabad, got two dozen glass bangles made to order with the names 'Shatrughan' and 'Poonam' inscribed on them. "They were made especially for their wedding, I don't think you can get such bangles made anywhere in India," Mahmood Miya said with pride. "*Bhabhi ne itni chudiyon ki kadar ki* (Poonam Bhabhi valued the bangles so much) that she wore them for almost twenty-four years."

Twenty-five years later, when the bangles had broken, one by one, Mahmood Miya got Poonam's wrist size and made another set for the Sinha couple's silver wedding anniversary, despatching his special gift with a pilot from Sahara Airlines. "Bhabhi wrote me a letter that the occasion on which she received them made them even more special. Sonakshi would also come to my shop in Patna, pick up all the bangles she liked, wear them from wrist to elbow and say, 'Uncle, Uncle, *maine itni baangdi pehenli hai* (Look, I have worn so many bangles).'"

For Poonam, the marriage that happened after fourteen emotionally heavy years, was a vindication of her everlasting belief that her devotion would one day chasten him. She was even willing to wed him on his terms which meant that she became his wife while he was still involved in a relationship outside his marriage. Karan Johar's father, the Late Yash Johar had a stag party before the wedding; Subhash Ghai threw one after. The wedding itself was at the Taj in South Bombay. The emotional strain Poonam was under became evident when during the *saat phera*s (Hindu wedding vows), the bride fainted.

When he took her home to Ramayan as his bride, there was more in store for the newly-wed Poonam as the air-conditioner in the master bedroom on the first floor inexplicably caught fire. It was put out before it could spread throughout the bungalow but the new bride felt a sense of deep foreboding and saw it as an ominous sign. It was left to her husband to reassure her that her stepping into his house was actually auspicious because it was probably her luck that had saved the whole place from catching fire.

The marriage was Poonam's first step to getting her man to stay by her side forever, even if it meant the kind of compromise few women would willingly accept. He was still involved with Reena Roy and for quite a few years, he

shunted between wife and girlfriend, a situation Poonam had walked into with eyes wide open. As the grapevine put it, “He was married here but was honeymooning there.”

What would perhaps be an unthinkable, unacceptable position for a more progressive woman was perhaps a vainglorious situation for a man who thought that a wife at home and a mistress outside was the ideal space to be in. There could be no better proof of manhood for a man whose machismo was his pride.

However, the reality was that beneath the macho bluster hid an anxious man. SS insisted that it was far from a dream situation for him. “I had to make a choice when I married Promi while I was still very involved with my co-star,” he acquiesced. “It might sound like a great position to be in for a man but it is actually very traumatic,” he shared, as he described what a man actually goes through when he’s caught between two women. “You are guilty when you are with either of them. It wasn’t as if I wanted to cheat on either but it takes time for a man to withdraw from an emotional situation. Promi stood like a rock beside me and waited patiently for me to withdraw completely from the relationship outside our marriage.

“In terms of emotions, in terms of suffering, stress and tension, Promi really went through a lot.”

Annapurna chuckled, “After marriage, Promi would spend all her time in the kitchen getting food ready for Sonu and his friends. When they went for their honeymoon to America, Lakhan said, ‘Check out if she’s in the kitchen there also while he is partying with friends.’ When they returned, we found out that was precisely what had happened.”

The Sinha clan was aware of SS’ daily need to entertain or be entertained and Poonam’s kitchen routine while he socialised. Like everything else that came with the territory, Poonam accepted it as a part and parcel of life as Mrs Shatrughan Sinha.

The marriage that has lasted over thirty-five strong years was not a cakewalk for either of them. “When we got married and she came to stay in Ramayan, Promi used to say, ‘My *banwas* (exile) of fourteen years happened even before marriage,’” remembered Shatrughan. The reference was to the fourteen-year exile that Lord Ram spent in the jungle with his wife Sita, once again a part of the Ramayan, the mythology so closely linked to the Sinha family.

“It was a difficult period for me also because withdrawing from an emotional entanglement elsewhere was taking its time,” SS explained. “Promi used to cry a

lot but she knew I was trying my best. Sorting out our lives took its own time because it was a question of a commitment to the other party also. When I was with her (Reena) outside, I was faced with the question, 'You've set up your home. So was I a toy to be used and cast away?' It was not a comfortable position to be in. I have to tell every man that an extra-marital situation puts you on a perpetual guilt trip. When you are at home, you feel guilty about neglecting the other woman. When you are with her, you feel guilty about your wife. On *karva chauth* or *teej* (festive occasions on which North Indian women fast for the long life of their husbands), you are caught not knowing where to go first when both have been fasting all day for you. What are you supposed to do? The situation leaves you stressed and tense."

There were also situations which seemed amusing in later years but caused Promi untold heartache. SS narrated one such incident that could've caused a conflagration at home had Poonam not been his patient pillar of support.

"I was in Pakistan and the telephone operator at the hotel was in a fix when there were calls from both (Poonam and Reena) at the same time, and they both asked the operator to be put through to me first. Promi had gracefully given in that time too. She told the operator, 'Never mind, put her on, she's like his sister!'

"I'd taken Yash Johar with me to Pakistan and he knew that I was frantically hunting for a *parandi* (fancy hair extension) all over Karachi. I didn't even know what a *parandi* was but I desperately wanted to bring back one. However, the market was closed because it was a Friday. When we returned, Yash Johar told Promi how frantically I had looked for a *parandi* all over Karachi for her. And Promi looked confused because she had never asked for one. Only then did Yash realise that it was the other person who had asked me to get it for her!

"Despite situations like this, Promi continued to be understanding. I was a victim of emotions and weakness," emphasised SS. "It took time but I gradually got out of it. That's why today whenever we have an argument, I tell Promi that if on a scale of one to ten I was right up there at number ten for my weaknesses, over the years I have improved and stand at a much better number now. On the other hand, she was a perfect ten to begin with but while all her other qualities are still fine, she has started losing her temper, answering me back; there's hypertension. She's the one who has changed for the worse over the years.

"Perhaps," SS mollified himself with the thought, "it is a catharsis for Promi after all the years of trauma that I put her through. So I would think her temper

tantrums today are justified."

Producer Pahlaj Nihalani, one of Shatrughan's closest friends during his stint in films and in his career as a politician, endorsed Poonam's graciousness about the situation with Reena Roy. Pahlaj's professional association with SS began with *Hathkadi* (1982) which also starred Sanjeev Kumar and Reena Roy in important roles. And he was caught in the cross-fire between the two lovers.

"After *Hathkadi*, I was keen to repeat the same setup of Shatru, Reena, Sanjeev Kumar for my next film, *Aandhi Toofan*," divulged the producer. "But Reena said a firm, 'No' to my offer. She said to me, 'Tell your friend to make up his mind. If he gives me an answer, I'll do the next film with him. Otherwise, it's a "No". I've made up my mind that if he doesn't marry me, I'm going to get married in eight days.'"

In 1982, Shatrughan was already married to Poonam but was still emotionally bound to Reena Roy and wouldn't cut off ties with her.

"Sonu was shooting at night for a film called *Telephone* (1985*)* in a hotel in Juhu when I went across and repeated Reena's message to him," Pahlaj gave the details. "He called her up and cried like a baby. For the first time, I saw him cry; he was very emotionally involved with her. That was the one time I spoke up and told him, 'Let go, let her get married.'

"To Promi's credit, she knew all that was happening," remarked Pahlaj. "But during the entire shooting of *Hathkadi*, never once did she try to find out anything or ask questions about what they were up to. We shot for one month in Goa but she never gave him any grief over it. She always knew, '*Ghoda jayega toh bhi wapas ghar hi aayega* (Even if he strays, he will return to the fold).'"

Pahlaj who understood his friend well, added cannily, "Sonu was also acutely aware of his reputation and was careful not to besmirch it."

Reena Roy helped SS make up his mind which way to head and stay put when she found herself a husband in cricketer Mohsin Khan and flew out of her co-star's reach. She had waited long enough for her man to enter into a Dharmendra-Hema Malini kind of arrangement with her. SS instinctively recoiled from it. But what made it even tougher for him was that his own brother Dr Ram Sinha did a surprise turn one day by asking him to take Reena Roy as his second wife.

4

Politics In The Family

The family – that dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape, nor, in our inmost hearts, ever quite wish to.

Dodie Smith

It was dramatic.

SS had an eight-month pregnant wife at home when he was summarily summoned and forced to a stand.

“I wasn’t the only one who had changed. My success had changed my own family,” SS remarked as he turned to a chilling chapter that outsiders knew nothing about.

“After my marriage, my eldest brother Dr Ram Sinha called me over one evening to Reena’s house in Bombay. When I reached there, he asked me point-blank to marry her, right there, right then. Behaving like a *thakur* (feudal lord) of yore, he said he had given his word to Reena that I would marry her. I was flabbergasted. When I asked him what he was up to, he told me imperiously, ‘You will do what I ask you to do.’ His tone turned threatening when he went on

to add, ‘If you don’t, I will expose you.’”

Reena’s family and Dr Ram were prepared for any kind of arrangement – they were ready to send for a priest and pin SS down right there to go through a midnight ceremony. Back home, Promi was in full bloom with twin babies (Luv and Kussh) ready for delivery. It was a poignant decision to make and a nightmare situation to face. Secretary Pawan Kumar remembered how disturbed he was when Ram bhaiya had compounded it by writing and circulating to all close family members, a long letter in which he had detailed SS’ personal life, ending it with the line, ‘And so he must marry Reena’. Pawan Kumar was aghast when he received a copy of it. Determined to avert a crisis in SS’ marriage to Promi, Pawan Kumar rushed to Ooty with common friend and lawyer Venky (who is no more). SS was shooting there for a film paradoxically called *Dil-e-Nadan* (which roughly translated into, ‘The heart is innocent’) with Rajesh Khanna and Jayaprada. Pawan got Venky to convince SS how disastrous it would be for him to go in for a second marriage. If SS was vacillating, perhaps this timely intervention helped him make up his mind against marriage to Reena. One isn’t sure if Promi knew about Pawan Kumar’s hand in saving her marriage because the secretary said that he did what he thought was his duty to the family and never spoke to her about it.

The incident transformed SS in many ways.

“Until then, I had idolised Ram bhaiya,” he frowned. “But I saw that he had changed with my success. How could such a highly educated man behave in such a manner?”

Changes had begun to creep into the Sinha family much earlier and SS felt that his meteoric stardom had much to do with it. One of the initial signs was the absence of Dr Ram Sinha at his youngest brother’s marriage to Promi although the invitation cards had been printed in his name, on his insistence. “He couldn’t, or he wouldn’t, come to my wedding,” said SS briefly.

He had perceived familial changes even before his marriage. “I began to hear comments like, ‘How did the *anpad* (illiterate one) of the family become its most successful member?’” SS cheerlessly recalled. “It seemed to rankle all of them that despite not being as academically accomplished as them, I had become the success story of the family. It changed people so much that when I looked after my parents till the very end, there were remarks like, ‘Let him do it, he’s made so much money. Anyway he’s spending so much on *aiyashi* (pursuit of pleasure), *chamcha*s (sycophants) and liquor, let him look after our parents.’” He began to

feel that his own family wasn't toasting his success.

His parents preferred their lifestyle in Patna to moving in with their celebrity son. BP Sinha had his club membership and his well-scheduled routine in Patna which he was loathe to disturb. Amma, comfortable with Bhojpuri and the familiarity of her own group of friends, felt like a fish out of water in Bombay. SS visited them at the slightest opportunity. "I always kept in touch with Patna and I looked after my parents' house." In fact, even long after his parents were gone, SS said that on the nights that he stayed over at his Kadam Kuan bungalow, he still slept like a baby.

He felt that his siblings resented everything he did. The growing distance between him and Ram bhaiya didn't diminish even when their father passed away.

SS grimly divulged, "Shockingly, Ram bhaiya didn't come down when my father and then my mother passed away. Nor did he attend my twenty-fifth anniversary party, although we had duly invited him.

"It's not like Ram bhaiya and I were not on talking terms," he pointed out. "We have always accorded him a lot of respect. But I admit that somewhere within me, those days of looking up to him as a role model were over."

For all his bratty ways, SS revelled in the role of reliable anchor for his parents in their last days. It was a role he played proficiently, displaying a sense of commitment and imparting strength to people in their most fragile moments. It happened when Poonam's sister, Aruna, lost her husband suddenly, leaving behind a young widow and twin daughters (the twin genes come from Poonam's side of the family). SS assured Poonam that henceforth, they would consider themselves the parents of five children. Aruna's two daughters, Sneha and Neha, would be theirs too. "My husband is God's good man," remarked Poonam. His presence in Aruna's and her daughters' lives gave them the strength and confidence they so badly needed at that hour. On every such occasion, the emotional dimension to SS showed up.

Annapurna was another family member who was bailed out time and again by her kid brother's thoughtfulness. SS saw his sister go through a low spell with her well-placed in-laws and sprang a surprise on her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

"On June 1, 1975, Sonu bought a new Fiat and sent it to us," Annapurna beamed with nostalgia. "My husband and I later had other cars of our own but our first one was the Fiat gifted to us by Sonu. We were very touched by his

thoughtfulness."

While SS dealt with the passing away of his parents and the growing distance with his brothers, he also discovered the bliss of being the head of his nuclear family.

"Fortunately, despite all the distractions, it was a divine blessing that I ultimately got somebody who is the rarest of rare," he eulogised his wife. "There is nobody to beat Promi in terms of loyalty, commitment, nurturing, caring and upbringing. Her beauty and sense of duty are top grade while her dignity, grace and intelligence have towered above everybody else. In every one of these spheres, I have never had any reason to regret our marriage. She has also given me such beautiful children, twin sons and a charming daughter."

The birth of Sonakshi was unplanned. Left to SS, he would not have gone in for a third child, content as he was with his sons, Luv and Kussh. He was forthright as he admitted, "It is true that initially I didn't want a third child. I was coming into politics and I had the *'Hum do, hamare do* (family planning mantra exhorting couples to have no more than two children)' policy on my mind." But when Poonam got pregnant again, she was so keen to have a third baby that they went ahead with it. A routine sonography (which was allowed those days) showed a nice, strong baby, probably another male child. Perhaps ironically, when SS became the Health Minister years later, he banned sex determination tests.

While the Sinhas awaited the birth of a third son, Sonakshi turned up a week before the expected delivery date. Amusingly, her arrival reduced the new mother to tears. SS narrated the story.

"I was shooting for the Bengali film, *Antarjali Jatra* (*Maha Yatra* in Hindi). Sonakshi was in a hurry and came along earlier than the due date. I was in Sagar Deep which was a one-and-a-half hour boat ride from Calcutta. We took a rickshaw, walked a long distance through mud and somehow reached Calcutta where I was informed that Promi was in hospital. We were having dinner with Brigadier Sharma and his wife Chitra who was assisting Goutam on the film, when we got the news that Promi had delivered a baby girl at night. To be in character for the role of a *chandal* in *Antarjali Jatra*, I had grown a beard. When we got the news of the delivery, I caught an early morning flight and went straight from the airport to Nanavati hospital in Bombay to see the baby. As soon as Promi saw me, she started crying. I had travel fatigue and was sun-tanned with a beard on my tired face. She misunderstood that look for unhappiness over

the birth of a baby girl! I scolded her and asked her from which regressive Hindi film she had picked up this scene. I hugged Promi and assured her that quite to the contrary, I was thrilled to have a girl. The family was now complete."

While she set aside her ambitions and dreams to see this marriage through, Poonam also suppressed her own personality, preferring a submissive role in this partnership. It lasted until the children grew up and Poonam began to flower again as an individual with a mind of her own. She handled the purse-strings of the family, deftly managing all their financial affairs and business interests. She even stepped out to act as Hrithik Roshan's mother in *Jodha Akbar* (2008), besides turning film producer.

An astonished SS looked on at the gradual but remarkable transformation and noted, "Today when Promi answers me back, though it's something that must be happening in most families, I am dumbstruck. Initially, she was so much in love and was so full of awe that until I had eaten and my plate was taken away like it is in a traditional Bengali or Bihari household, she could never bring herself to eat. If she was eating and I returned home suddenly, before even my dog could react to my car horn, she would hear it and stop eating. She was completely tuned into me, her vibrations were so strong. Whatever the time, even if I returned home after 2 and 3 am, she wouldn't eat until I had eaten. It took me years to convince her that this kind of thinking was outdated; that *zamana* (era) was over. I would tell her that she had to look after her health, she was pregnant, she had to eat on time. I used to cite the example of the safety instructions on an aircraft where they'd say, 'Put the oxygen mask on your face before you help children and others around you.' Similarly, I told her, she had to first take good care of her own health to be able to look after the rest of the family.

"Of course, times have changed now and she's no longer like that," he added curtly.

The metamorphosis he spoke about included changing the spelling of her name from 'Poonam' to 'Punam'. A few years ago, an astrologer had advised Poonam to do it, assuring her that it would give her independence and help her find a new identity. "But he hates it," laughed Poonam. "Every time I write my name with a 'u' instead of 'oo', Soni will ask me to change it. But I love spelling my name as Punam and have been doing it for the last few years. It has definitely brought a change in my personality. I'm not as subservient as I once was."

SS had another surprise awaiting him. Poonam revealed with a wide grin that

she was keen to pen her own autobiography and call it, *The Man I Never Knew.*

From a lopsided relationship where only he mattered and she chose not to have a say, the SS-Poonam partnership steered into calmer, even waters. The erstwhile ladies' man began behaving like a family man, a supportive husband and fond father. He aspired to project a spanking clean image of himself and he pulled it off.

The only wrinkle in his life was his deteriorating relationship with Ram, Lakhan and Bharat. If the changing equation with Dr Ram Sinha was inexplicable, the exit of second brother Dr Lakhan Sinha's from SS' inner circle was completely political.

Keenly interested in the movie industry, Lakhan was the only member of the academically well-qualified family who had actively encouraged his star-struck brother's filmi aspirations. It explained why, despite a stint as an Assistant Professor at the Engineering Institute in Jamshedpur, followed by a PhD in Mechanical Engineering from Texas and a brilliant job as a senior research scientist with Pratt and Whitney (manufacturers of engines for Boeing), Lakhan threw it all up. He even brushed aside a call to collect his green card and opted to settle down in his brother's shadow in Bombay.

While Dr Ram Sinha stayed on in the US and Dr Bharat Sinha had a flourishing medical practice in the UK, Dr Lakhan Sinha came back home after eighteen years.

Initially, Lakhan tried to establish his own identity by producing two Hindi movies, *Rahi* (in 1987, starring Sanjeev Kumar, Smita Patil and Shatrughan Sinha) and *Billoo Badshah* (in 1989, starring Shatrughan Sinha, Govinda, Anita Raaj). But he could do that only with SS' unstinted support. Lakhan also had a hand in making *Prem Geet* (1981), a joint production with SS' secretary, Pawan Kumar. "I got a tax-exemption for *Prem Geet* in Bihar and J&K, and was also responsible for bringing the Late Jagjit Singh into the film industry as a music director," Lakhan pointed out.

The eighties were cosy between the brothers but in the nineties, the first signs of familial unease were visible. Lakhan severed official ties with SS' home banner, Ramayan Chitra. He explained, "Ramayan Chitra became too crowded, so I got my own office in 1995 and made *Jahan Jayiyega Wahan Payiyega* with Govinda."

Whatever the lure that brought him back to India, one redoubtable fact was that Dr Lakhan Sinha gave up his lucrative independent identity as an engineer

in the US. He continued to do, “Some consultation work from here” but the Hindi film industry knew him better as Shatrughan Sinha’s brother.

Unfortunately, being the only family member who opted to share in SS’ stardom, Lakhan was also the worst hit when cracks developed within the family.

Trouble reared its head when SS became a Cabinet Minister.

The straight-talking SS proved to be different from his colleagues – he did not sweep domestic issues under the carpet. “I was very close to Lakhan bhaiya who had signed my FTII form. But we fell apart,” SS laid it bare.

He analysed, “Just as I had no contribution in my brothers becoming doctors and engineers, they too had no hand in my joining politics or becoming a Cabinet Minister. And they couldn’t understand that.”

According to SS, Lakhan wanted to function as the *de facto* Minister and expected his kid brother to meekly act as his rubber stamp. But the kid brother was a full-grown man with achievements of his own and had no intentions of being a pushover.

“As a Cabinet Minister, if I wanted to, I could consult Dr Lakhan Sinha as my senior and my guardian,” SS set out the details. “But there is a thin line between advice and domination. It progressively grew to be the latter. My secretary was told what to do and reports were sought from the staff by Lakhan bhaiya. It reached a point where I had to one day tell him that if he had anything to ask or say to my staff, perhaps it should be routed through me. There was also a certain familiarity being exhibited which I found unacceptable. Once, in front of some foreigners, his friend familiarly addressed me as ‘Sonu’. His friend also instructed me before some people, ‘Tell them that Lakhan bhaiya runs the Ministry, they want to hear it from you that he runs this Ministry.’”

By this time, the thrill of being endearingly called ‘Sonu’ had been replaced with discomfort. “People began to display familiarity by calling me ‘Sonu’ or ‘Sonuji’ to show how close they were to me. I began to find the name a burden,” he explained, often cringing when thus addressed in public.

Whether Sonu or Shatrughan, “I was not going to be a mute Cabinet Minister,” he ruled.

“I had to tell Lakhan bhaiya that I was through with all of them taking me for granted. All decisions would be mine alone in consultation with my team. I believe Lakhan bhaiya later told my wife, ‘Sonu has become very arrogant’.

Thereafter, it grew uglier. But I was not one to take my ministerial responsibilities lightly. I had earned my place in the Cabinet with difficulty and I was not going to compromise it for anybody."

The distance grew to such an extent that although Lakhan continued to stay in an apartment in Bombay owned by his younger brother, he didn't attend the Sinha couple's silver wedding anniversary.

Things got worse and when Lakhan's only daughter Preeta got married to boyfriend Neil (in December 2008), the star-brother retaliated by staying out of it.

"The only reason I did not go to Sonu and Promi's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary was because l was not invited," said Lakhan flatly. Apparently, on Annapurna's intervention, Poonam had sent Lakhan a card but only a day before the event. "Guests had been invited a month earlier. This eleventh-hour invitation was as good as not being invited," he explained.

From Lakhan's perspective, the strained relationship got really knotted up when SS did not attend his niece, Preeta's wedding.

Preeta had personally invited 'Shatru Chacha' but SS and Poonam were conspicuously absent at the nuptials. "Sonakshi showed her loyalty to her parents and didn't come to any of the functions. But Luvie and Kushi (Luv and Kussh) attended the wedding," said Lakhan. The bride was hurt and wondered what she had done for her uncle to boycott her big day.

Apart from family functions, certain other matters too had deepened the rift between the brothers.

"I have two flats in the US," said Lakhan. "I had given the power of attorney to Sonu's lawyer friend, Qazi Moid. Sonu can't ever have good friends," he put in as an aside. "Moid soon claimed that our flat was actually his. Since I was in India for twenty years, we couldn't do much from here. But we filed a case and after three years the federal court ruled in our favour and passed very critical remarks on Moid." Moid, a lawyer, lost his license to practise in the US.

There came a time when SS too, ran into a problem with Moid and had to file a case against him in Patna. "Moid had taken a flat in Luv-Kussh Towers (a construction project Poonam had supervised in Patna)," Lakhan disclosed.

Around this time, Harris Lyll, a common friend of the two Sinha brothers, began to call up Lakhan asking for a copy of the judgement against Moid. When Lakhan questioned his reasons for wanting it, Harris blurted out that it was SS

who wanted it to aid his own case against Moid.

Lakhan was cryptic about the way his brother had gone about the whole case. “Promi or Sonu should have asked me for it upfront, I’d have gladly given it. Why fool me by asking other people to get a copy of it from me?” he wondered.

SS’ counter was straightforward: “I did not ask Lakhan bhaiya for the document because we were not on talking terms.”

There were two sides to every issue.

The star’s oft-mentioned comment that his brothers resented the celebrity status of the ‘illiterate’ one in the family, was not entirely without merit. With a marked Bihari accent, Lakhan did describe SS as the only one in the family who was, “Not on par with the rest in education.”

However, Bharat downplayed his differences with SS.

“My not attending his twenty-fifth anniversary party had nothing to do with differences but with my own commitments. An ordinary worker could be busier than a multi-billionaire, you know,” he added dryly.

“I am not a flamboyant man, so we have personality and lifestyle differences, which is not the same as having differences between us. In fact, I appreciate the fact that irrespective of his celebrity standing, whenever I have anything to say, he always hears me out.”

But Bharat admitted that a stand-off with SS had happened during their mother’s last moments.

“My mother was on the ventilator and was slipping away,” he recalled. “I was totally against the way her misery was being prolonged by our doctors in Patna. One could see from her condition that she was not going to return. She was eighty-four years old and when she’s been on the ventilator for ten days, there comes a stage when one has to say, enough is enough.

“But Shatrughan never agreed to remove the ventilator. From his point of view, perhaps he felt that by removing it, she would die today instead of a few days later. And there were enough admirers around him to egg him on.

“It was a classic layman vs doctor situation, something that many families go through,” remarked Dr Bharat Sinha. “In such a situation, normally the opinion of the doctor in the family prevails. Just as Shatrughan sometimes says, ‘I’m a politician and I know what I’m doing,’ so am I a doctor and this decision should have been left to me. So yes, we did have a difference of opinion in this matter.”

Lakhan laconically observed, “And I was caught between them.”

For the rest of his life, SS nursed the doubt that when his mother did pass away, perhaps Bharat had pulled the plug. SS was shaving and the razor had touched the scar on the left corner of his lip when he got a call that his mother was no more. “To this day, every time I shave and reach that spot near my lip, I remember my mother,” he said. And the doubt would rush in again.

If he, as the youngest, was wracked with emotions that coloured a practical decision, Shyama Devi too had only his interests in her dying thoughts. Lakhan was the last person she spoke to from her hospital bed and the last sentence she uttered to him was, ‘*Shatrughanji ke liye mutton banake khila dena* (Feed Shatrughan his favourite mutton).’ “Though she was half-dead and incoherent, that was her last thought,” Lakhan recalled. SS doesn’t touch mutton anymore but the implication was to take care of the youngest.

An important point Bharat raised was about SS nursing the feeling that his brothers had ganged up against the least academically qualified one amongst them.

“This is the first time I’m hearing this and if Shatrughan nurses such an idea, he must get it out of his head,” the doctor advised. “On the contrary, from the time I can remember, I have always been a major admirer of achievers in sports, films, politics and other fields who may have had little education but have conquered the world. Kamaraj was an *angootha chhaap* (illiterate). But who wouldn’t admire such people? It is a matter of pride for our family that our youngest brother is so successful.”

While Dr Bharat Sinha was placatory, the older two, Dr Ram Sinha and Dr Lakhan Sinha had their grievances against SS. Years later, blood did prove thicker than water when all four brothers came together for Kussh’s wedding in 2015. But even at the wedding, Ram refused to participate in Shatrughan’s biography.

“Whatever Lakhan bhaiya says about Shatrughan is an echo of my own feelings,” maintained Ram. “I don’t wish to speak; Lakhan bhaiya can speak for me.”

Lakhan willingly got it all off his chest, some of it personal and some on behalf of brother Ram too.

He hit back at SS’ grouse that Lakhan had tried to take undue advantage of SS’ position as Cabinet Minister. “When you want to justify something, you can make any charge,” Lakhan countered. “Once, my wife Geeta had gone with two

or three friends to stay at Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT). Sonu complained to somebody, 'Look, *mera naam misuse kiya* (He's misused my name).' But even today I make my friends stay at the guest house in JNPT. Sonu's relations with people may be over but my equation with all of them remains good."

SS interposed pithily, "Through whom did Lakhan bhaiya get to know and establish relations with these people in the first place?"

One could dismiss all of this as kitchen politics, the kind of domestic squabbles that could upset equations for a short while within a family, and be amicably sorted out when tempers cooled.

But before bonhomie returned, the relations touched a nadir during the Lok Sabha elections of 2009 when SS and fellow-Bihari actor Shekhar Suman fought as opponents for the Patna Sahib seat.

SS recalled the electoral battle and said, "People with a myopic vision brought in Shekhar Suman, also a Kayasth by caste. I did not get provoked by his candidature as I felt everybody had the right to contest the elections. I'd decided that after the elections I'd go over and meet his parents and say, 'It wasn't personal, it was a political battle, my regard for you remains unchanged.' But ultimately I didn't do that because I thought it would have been misinterpreted as rubbing salt into their wounds because Shekhar lost his deposit and was declared a poor third. In politics, you often can't freely do what you like – that's a price you have to pay," he sighed.

"I didn't nurse a grudge against Shekhar. He made mistakes, he paid his price. I was sad that he'd got into this slush. He had famously declared, 'If Shatru bhaiya says I should not fight, I won't.' My retort was, 'When he decided to fight this election opposite me, did he ask for my opinion?'"

Politics is often divisive and the Shatrughan-Shekhar face-off was no different.

SS disclosed, "On the last day, out of desperation, what happened came as a big shock to me. I still won't blame Shekhar for it as much as other people, although it was in very bad taste. The Opposition got a letter from Lakhan published in the local papers, asking voters to vote for an educated, able man like Shekhar Suman. It went on to talk about me as someone who didn't attend his niece's wedding and that I had saddened my mother's heart with what I had done to the family."

Fortunately for SS, he was too strong a candidate in Patna for one wayward

letter to make an impact. “My image was such that many big papers refused to even carry it as an ad,” SS stated with pride. “But it got printed in some papers like *Sahara Urdu. Jagran* published half of it as an ad. They distributed these copies all over Patna.”

There was no real damage done to SS’ reputation but it did expose a rift in the family.

“A local man had tried to put pressure on me to help Shekhar Suman during the elections,” Lakhan accepted. “The Congress offered me any lollypop I wanted to campaign for Shekhar. I kept saying, ‘The question does not arise.’ But every second day, they’d call me and say, ‘Come for just a day, we’ll call a press conference.’ Finally, a very major Congress leader (name withheld) met me. I said to him, ‘Do you know how troubled my parents’ *atma* (soul) would be if I worked against their son in this very town?’ The Congress leader understood my sentiments, Shekhar also understood how I felt. But some Urdu paper wrote against Sonu and mentioned that he hadn’t attended my daughter’s wedding. One or two others also wrote something like that. I started getting calls from people like Pahlaj about it. I explained to him that if I had to work against Sonu, I would have come to Patna. He accepted that. Everybody accepted it. But there must be some doubt still lingering in Sonu’s mind.”

If SS continued to believe that his brother had stooped to bringing family squabbles into the electoral fray, Lakhan snorted, “Then he is *kaan ka kachcha* (wet behind the ears, naïve). If I had to take him on, *dushmani karna hota*, *toh jamm ke karte* (If I had to fight him, I’d have taken him full on). They (the Congress) were ready to have all the TV channels cover it.”

Amidst all this acrimony, family pride surfaced as Lakhan proudly said in an aside, “Even if I had done it (worked against Shatru), it would have made no difference to the results. Only he could have won that election.

“If only he had come to the wedding,” Lakhan reverted to a former plaint, the “news of a rift in the family would have never gone out.”

The bitter aftertaste made SS decide not to attempt a patch-up with his older sibling. “I wanted peace and amity to prevail in the family. But I know this happens in many families,” he added wistfully. “The one who does the most for the family inexplicably becomes the villain of the show. The biggest factor that has troubled many of them is, how did he achieve all that he did without piggy-backing on anybody, without anybody’s help? There is a sense of rejection in them.

“But why?” he debated aloud. “I have never had the arrogance of wealth. I used to even call myself the temporary minister. Whenever I went to America, I always took an appointment and then went to meet Ram bhaiya. Whenever I have given Ram bhaiya any money, I have never asked for it to be returned. So why do they harbour such resentment against me?”

King Lear-like, he went into a soliloquy and announced, “Ramayan, the bungalow was made because of four brothers – Ram, Lakhan, Bharat and Shatrughan. But that was demolished. Now that Ramayan has been rebuilt, it will be the story of only Shatrughan Sinha, his wife and his children. It will be their story alone.”

But blood was thicker than water. As days passed by, the intensity of the family war lessened. “*Ghamand hai* (He is an egoist),” remarked Lakhan about his brother even as there were indications of a thaw in the cold war. Poonam invited Lakhan and Geeta to the premiere of Sonakshi’s debut film *Dabangg* (2010).

For the first time, the warring brothers came face-to-face, and that too, within the confined space of a lift. “What a coincidence it was,” Lakhan smiled. “When we came out of the trial show and got into the lift, Sonu got into it too. It was too late for him to back out. So he joined hands in my direction (did a *namaste*) and I did the same.”

There were far too many occasions, joyous and sad, to avoid each other. When Aruna succumbed to cancer, Lakhan rushed to condole with her grieving sister, Poonam.

“Promi was in charge of everything,” Lakhan said. “Sonu came late there also; we had reached earlier. Pahlaj and other friends always said, ‘*Chalo*, come on and start talking to each other.’ But whatever the occasion, there was no conversation between us. Once, by sheer chance, we were at Delhi airport at the same time and one of his people shouted, ‘Lakhan bhaiya, Lakhan bhaiya’. In public, once we were face-to-face, nothing could be done about it, so Sonu did a proper *namaste* to me and I also reciprocated.”

But the indications were strong that they would one day share more than just a *namaste*. “In my entire life I have never stopped talking to anyone except Shatrughan Sinha,” Lakhan averred. “But Sonu has a problem with the other brothers also, though it is more with me. When he goes to Washington, he will call Ram bhaiya and say, ‘I’m coming over for dinner’. And there too, he’ll take somebody with him and go. To Ram bhaiya’s son’s wedding also, he took

someone along," he commented, pointing to Shatrughan's filmic trait of always wanting his coterie around him when he stepped out. "He has a problem with all his siblings."

SS heard that one out and wondered aloud, "Do I have problems with all my brothers or is it the other way around? I feel, why have all of them ganged up against me? Also, when I'm abroad, how do you expect me to move around on my own? I obviously need to have someone take me to Ram bhaiya's place or anywhere else."

Despite the acerbic remarks against each other, on December 9, 2011, Lakhan and Geeta turned up for a dinner hosted for Shatrughan's birthday, even if they did not talk to the birthday boy!

"Sonu will have to take the first step," Lakhan was firm about it. "Promi took it, I reciprocated. It also means that we were never on her hate list," he chuckled.

Poonam herself kept it short and remarked, "Someone has to maintain the balance. I think life is too short to have misunderstandings forever."

But before the family got together again, it was the cold war with Shekhar Suman that ended first. It was a war which should never have happened because SS had fashioned himself into a godfather of every Bihari who stepped into Bombay, especially in the glamour world. It was an image well described by Shekhar as he tracked his idol-admirer equation with the senior Patna-ite.

"The stand-off was created by vested interests," Shekhar emphasised, echoing more or less a similar observation made by Lakhan.

But both sides did shake hands eventually.

Shekhar stated, "What's more important is that we're back together. Misunderstandings may worsen because of lack of communication but beyond a point, in a moment of self-assessment and analysis, you wonder why a friendship that has withstood time and adverse situations over two decades, should run into rough weather.

"So, I was always hopeful. From my side, I've had so much of respect for this man called Mr Shatrughan Sinha that I've looked upon him as an older brother, almost a father figure. He is like this big don. Even as kids, the only person I wanted to see was Mr Shatrughan Sinha because he was from Patna, my town. All of us were so proud of him. I remember posters of his films would say, 'Starring SS', with 'Patna' in brackets. Often we'd stand outside his house in Kadam Kuan, hoping to get a glimpse of him."

Shekhar was still in school when he first met SS. He remembered, “My sister was in Bombay, I’d come here to meet her and Shatru was shooting at Hotel Horizon in Juhu for a film called *Parmatma* with Rekha. He was dressed up as Dev Anand and Rekha was dressed like Zeenat Aman. Little did I know then that Rekha would one day be my first heroine (in *Utsav).* I was watching the shooting with the crowd when I was introduced to him. But we were school kids and I was completely in awe of this person who had the most fantastic bass voice. He was famous for his voice and his scars, and it was a huge excitement for me to see him in flesh and blood. I loved the Bihari tone he would speak in. He was very hospitable and said that if there was anything we needed, any shoot we wanted to go to, he’d take care of it. I remembered him from that first meeting as someone very amiable and warm.”

As an adult, Shekhar got his first glimpse of SS once again at a hotel in Juhu. “I saw him at Centaur hotel when he was in full bloom, with his shirt buttons open and a big locket that he would always wear. He had walked in with Reena Roy. All of us got terribly excited because they were a talked-about pair and we jumped with joy in the foyer. He walked in and looked around like a huge big star. He always had the aura of a star. When he stood tall and tossed his hair, you felt, now he’ll turn around and say, *‘Khamosh’*.”

Soon, Shekhar stepped into the same industry. “When I came here in the mid-eighties, he was the first person I went to for advice, despite the fact that I’d already got my first film *Utsav*. In Bihar there’s a saying that two Kayasths will always find a connection somewhere. He knew about my family, about my father because he was a well-respected doctor. And he’d heard about me before I met him.

“He also has this incredible memory where he’ll remember your name and all other details after just one meeting. He actually remembered the Hotel Horizon meeting with the schoolboy and asked about my father. He’s very particular about these things. He always takes the name of your father, uncles, so there’s a very strong bond that he forges, it’s not superficial.

“When I came to Bombay in the eighties to make my career, I went to meet him at Mehboob Studios. We got around to talking about being Biharis. At that time, I felt I also owed a little allegiance to Delhi because I’d studied there but he didn’t like that. He was always very, very proud to be a Bihari. A huge amount of credit has to go to Shatrughan Sinha for making Biharis so respectable. I had a more cosmopolitan bent of mind but he said, ‘No, if you’re a

Bihari, you're a Bihari'. So I said, 'Okay, sorry,'" dimpled Shekhar with a twinkle in his eyes.

They established what seemed like an unbreakable bond between two Biharis finding fame and fortune in the entertainment industry. Shekhar who never calls him 'Shatru' or by the more familiar 'Sonu', but always attaches a 'Bhaiya' or 'Sir' to the name, became a regular at Ramayan, the one-point meeting place for all Biharis. Even in this unequal friendship where Shekhar was still a novice and SS was the celebrity, certain sterling Sinha qualities impressed the newcomer.

"He always returns a call, whatever the time. He's a 3 am friend, a 3 am brother, not just for me but for anyone in this industry. He's a child at heart but it's a heart of gold. He's forever willing to help people."

Shekhar accurately sketched SS as he observed, "He may appear to be the big star outside and when he's rubbed the wrong way, he may seem arrogant. But he's just an ordinary Bihari simpleton who believes in strong, warm relationships and in being there for you."

It was a sentiment that many friends in Patna vouched for, as bonds forged in childhood have lasted over six decades.

Hiraji, his buddy from Kadam Kuan, said, "He became a big celebrity but kept all his childhood friends tied close to him. Even at the biggest of functions, he would watch out for his friends to ensure that they were not inconvenienced in any manner. We also realised that we had to respect the person he had become. In front of others, I never called him 'Shatrughan', I call him 'Shatruji'. That sent out a message to other people too, on how to behave in front of him. When he stood for elections from Patna Sahib, it was as if a family member was in the fray. All of us worked for him as if we ourselves were standing for elections."

SS relished playing godfather in return for all the loyalty.

The Sumans had first-hand experience of SS' penchant to play saviour in times of crises, when their first son Aayush was diagnosed with a serious heart condition (he later succumbed to it).

"Bhaiya had called up doctors here and in America," Shekhar revealed. "He made me speak to them and coordinated with them so that when they came down to India, they could come and check Aayush. He would always call my wife Alka or me and check if there was anything else he could do."

There were other occasions too, when SS stepped in like the big brother you could turn to in a crisis.

Shekhar talked of the time he'd run into a spot of trouble with the police. "They had noted down the wrong car number at some incident and had got my car number by mistake. I told them that I wasn't there at the incident but they insisted on calling me to the police station. I was scared because I hadn't done anything and coming from the background that I did, I didn't want to be seen around a police station. I called Sonu bhaiya from the police station. Promi bhabhi was at home and she passed on the message to him. Within seconds, the cops were all out there saluting me. That's his influence and that's how quickly he moves without any procrastination."

The warmth turned icy when the Indian Television Academy (headed by SS' FTII junior Shashi Ranjan and wife Anu) celebrated its second anniversary and Shekhar Suman as compère made a wisecrack that didn't go down well with Poonam. Or with SS. It was a reaction that left Shekhar completely bewildered.

"The first premise that I must establish is that Bhaiya can normally take a joke at his expense," Shekhar maintained, long after his joke had backfired on him. "I have often nudged him in public and he has laughed the loudest. Most times he'd come back with a repartee too. We had such friendly banters between us that I wondered many a time, what was the trigger point that day that set off the cold war between us?"

Shekhar replayed the ITA incident. "I had made a funny, completely innocuous comment about his play *Pati Patni Aur Main*. Just to play safe, I had confided in him that this was what I was going to say. He had laughed and said, go ahead. *Pati Patni Aur Main* was immensely successful and many top politicians had seen it. So I had wisecracked, 'Mr Sinha likes it so much that he's seen it six times himself!'

"I don't know what exactly went wrong after that but I could only assume that he had taken umbrage to that remark," Shekhar said. "By the time I came off stage, things had gotten so out of hand that I was shocked. I'd said nothing humiliating or disrespectful; it was only something said in jest. If I'd known that it would have a repercussion of that scale, I would probably not have said it."

The ITA trigger point created an uneasy, icy atmosphere every time SS and Suman breathed the same air.

"It was very awkward," agreed Shekhar. "On a number of occasions, I made a lot of effort to go up and greet him but I felt he was not being responsive which made me uncomfortable. After a while I decided it was better not to cross his path."

It got more hostile when Shekhar waved a red flag by standing as the Congress candidate opposite SS for the Patna Sahib seat in 2009.

Shekhar had much in common with the star of Bihar. Both Sagittarians (Sinha's birthday: December 9, Suman's: December 7), not only were they from Patna but they even hailed from the same area – Kadam Kuan. The two famous Kayasths also belonged to well-respected families. While Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Sinha was a renowned academician, Shekhar's father, well-respected surgeon Dr Phani Bhushan Prasad, was Head of Department, Nalanda Medical College Hospital before retiring as Director General of Health Services. Shekhar and SS were both essentially Patna boys who had made their way to Bombay, seeking fame and fortune in the world of entertainment. Great mimics, they shared similar traits like forthright views and an irreverent sense of humour.

They were such close buddies that *Stardust* had once done a combined interview with them where SS had inadvertently passed a remark on the Marwari community. He and the magazine were sued by the community and SS had to apologise for the unintentional hurt caused by his remark.

The two Bihari men had so much in common that they could easily have been blood brothers.

Perhaps these similarities made the Congress pit Shekhar against SS in the 2009 elections. Wiser after the battle, Shekhar believed that he should never have agreed to an electoral scuffle with a man he looked up to.

He rued his decision to take their cold war to the hustings. "In hindsight, I feel that considering the respect I have always had for him, I should not have stood for that election. But I had reasoned that in an earlier election, Shatruji had stood opposite Rajesh Khanna and it was not as if he was against him personally. With that in mind, I thought that morally it was not wrong to stand opposite him. The Congress was pushing me to stand for elections, I had already said 'No' to them on prior occasions."

He converted it into a 'Yes' because, "I was sitting in my den at home when Mr Ahmed Patel called up and said, 'You have to fight the elections'. I said, 'Look, I'm not keen'. He countered me and said, 'No, no, you should, it is a great opportunity'. I wondered, 'How long can I keep saying "No"? I hope they don't feel slighted or think I'm riding a high horse.' I was in a spot, I was getting pushed into a corner and that's when I said, 'Yes'. I remember the Chief Minister of Bihar, Mr Nitish Kumar, had called and told me, 'If you had come into my party, you'd have won hands down'. The Congress had no cadre, no base, no

foundation in Bihar, no party strength. They had joined hands with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD, Lalu Prasad Yadav) and lost their credibility.

“But that’s not important. What’s important is that I was not keen to fight the election. I was not cut out for politics. Also, the kind of shows (especially on TV) I did were those where I could say anything about anybody from any party. By going into politics, I would lose that power too. If I could turn the clock back, I wouldn’t have fought that election.”

But politicians had sniffed out that two friends, now estranged, made for a clever election strategy.

“Yes, I think they capitalised on it,” admitted Shekhar. “That’s what politics is about, so I don’t blame them. If anybody, I blame myself. They’re always looking for such opponents and opportunities.”

Early in life, Shekhar’s father had dropped his surname to keep caste out of the picture but politics was such dirty business that the debate point became Kayasth vs Kayasth when he was chosen to oppose SS.

Shekhar protested, “I was blissfully unaware of what was going on. But the Kayasth card was probably used during elections to cut into his votes. It’s what’s called *vote katua* in Bihar, cutting into the other person’s votes.”

Shekhar confirmed that the Congress had tried to pitch Lakhan Sinha against SS.

“They did,” nodded Shekhar. “They’re a bunch of dirty politicians who’ll probably stoop to any level to get there. They’re the ones who told me that we should make use of Mr Sinha’s strained relationship with his brother. And I completely freaked. I remember going to a newspaper office and saying, ‘If you’re going to be writing anything about this, I’ll speak against the Congress, against the party, I’m not going to be a part of this.’ I fired everyone around me.”

Shekhar’s account didn’t exactly exonerate Lakhan from the charge of trying to demean younger brother Shatrughan during the elections.

“I don’t know if Lakhan bhaiya was willing,” shrugged Shekhar. “I didn’t even go there. But yes, he would call me up and give me his blessings. But he never said anything against Mr Sinha to me.”

On April 30, 2011, on Dr Phani Prasad’s birth anniversary, it took only a few minutes together, all by themselves without any third person to inhibit them, for the estranged friends to rediscover the warmth they had once shared. It happened in an unlikely place – on a Mumbai-Patna flight when Shekhar was on his way

home for a prayer meeting for his father.

The mood in which the rapprochement happened was surprisingly light as Shekhar smiled widely, “It was very funny because when I boarded the plane, the airhostess told me, ‘There is some other gentleman on your seat.’ So I said, ‘Get him out.’ And she said, ‘It is Mr Shatrughan Sinha.’ When I heard his name, I told her quickly, ‘Okay, then I’ll go to Patna standing.’ Bhaiya saw me and asked me, ‘Can I sit here?’ and I said, ‘Of course, Sir, you can sit on your seat and on mine.’” Shekhar’s dimples flashed again.

There had been no communication between them for eight years but it didn’t take even 8 minutes for the many misunderstandings to melt away without apology or explanation.

“We got talking on that flight,” continued Shekhar, “when I mentioned my father’s *barsi* (death anniversary) and said, ‘We have a small function in his memory, would you like to come?’ he said, ‘Even if you had not invited me, I would have been there.’ He cancelled all his other appointments and came to my father’s *barsi*.”

In true SS style, he made up for the eight years of silence by talking volumes to the press in Patna about his presence at his opponent’s family function.

“He told the media, ‘I know you’ll ask me how I’m here but if Shekhar hadn’t stood opposite me, it would have been someone else. It’s nothing personal. There are lawyers who fight against each other in court but are friends once they come out.’” He spoke in that vein which was very sweet of him.

“When your relationship is honest, you don’t have to clarify or justify anything. Nothing was ever said; it got cleared on its own, like a self-evolving, self-healing process. That was really beautiful,” said a much-relieved Shekhar. “From both sides we just took off from where we’d left and the friendship became stronger and warmer.”

Shekhar resigned from the Congress in 2012.

The Shekhar Suman chapter was an accurate demonstration of the real Shatrughan Sinha – a man who hurt easily, jumped the gun hastily but also extended the olive branch companionably like a true people’s person.

It was the same with his brothers. When SS had a bypass surgery at Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital in July 2012, resentments of the past were buried.

“As soon as I heard that Shatrughan was on the ventilator, I flew down to be with him. Would I have done that if there had been any animosity between us?”

queried Dr Bharat Sinha. “I was not even informed about his illness by anybody in the family. But when my son called me from Bengaluru to say he’d heard that Shatruji was on the ventilator, *hamra kaan khada hua* (my ears perked up; I realised the seriousness of the situation) and flew down immediately.”

Exactly a year later, Lakhan too had the same surgery performed on him in July 2013 at the same hospital, in the same month, on the same floor and by the same surgeon. “Dr Anvay Mulay who operated on us commented that when he opened me up, he found the configuration of both our hearts exactly the same,” Lakhan smiled softly.

SS too accepted that perhaps he had been at fault during his niece’s wedding. “When I think about it, I feel I should have gone to her marriage,” he said regretfully.

Soon it was time for a hearty laugh as the two brothers swept the past aside and went over to each other’s place for dinner.

Sinha’s Ramayan had it all. Family feuds and souring friendships, political alliances and allegiances on test, topped with a happy ending.

5

Rocky And Rock-steady Friendships

Friends are people who know you really well and like you anyway.

Greg Tamblyn

When Ramayan became his address, there was an attempt made to keep it pious – alcohol was not served on the premise. The rule wasn't bent for anybody, not even for Black Label tippler, Raj Kapoor.

In 1976, when SS' secretary produced *Khan Dost* which co-starred him with his idol, Raj Kapoor had gone over to Ramayan for a narration where Subhash Ghai and Pawan Kumar were also present. Elsewhere in the bungalow was Shyama Devi who had come to visit her star son.

"Rajji was here till about 4 am," narrated SS. "He must have wondered what we were up to when we kept talking, discussing but served no alcohol. I explained to him that we didn't serve liquor at Ramayan. He was so impressed, he said, 'Oh, this is Ammaji's *sanskar*, I must touch her feet.' Amma was woken up at 3 am, he touched her feet and said several nice things about me which made me feel taller than my 6'2". After a while I felt I had to do something about it, so we organised a van outside the house. At 4 am, in the van on the

road, we served Raj Kapoor a drink. He graciously declined the offer but we wanted to extend at least this much hospitality to him."

The embargo was lifted much later when Subhash Ghai brought Poonam around into accepting that it would be wise to let her husband stay home and have a drink indoors.

"When I say it was Subhash Ghai's idea to have liquor served inside Ramayan, I'm not blaming him," said SS. "I've always been fond of him and we have been very close. We may have had our professional differences, maybe to some brief extent I was also to blame for it," he accepted. "But at different stages of our friendship, many people would point out to me that he had backstabbed me."

Ghai was SS' senior at FTII but he hit it off so well with the tall, lanky acting student from Patna that in the late sixties and early seventies, their friendship blossomed into a very successful professional partnership. By this time, SS' ascent had truly begun and it was his turn to do what he could for the rest of his gang.

"I always thought he was a very good actor," stated SS. "So when life started looking up for me, I would recommend him for a part whenever possible." *Do Yaar*, a two-hero action film that did well in its time, was a classic example. Its maker, Late Kewal Mishra was close to SS. So when the rising star recommended Subhash Ghai's name for the other hero's role, Mishra willingly went along with the idea.

But Ghai who should have grabbed it at any cost, upped his fee and asked for close to Rs 75,000 which was astronomical for a newcomer those days. An irate Kewal Mishra opted instead for Vinod Khanna who came on board for almost the same price. Vinod had already become popular and the repetition of the hunky *Mere Apne* team helped turn the film into a huge hit.

Kalicharan, the big break that put actor Subhash Ghai in the director's saddle and simultaneously took SS to the top slot as hero, was also contentious territory. In many of his interviews, Ghai had spoken about the time he had narrated *Kalicharan* to his FTII friend only to find SS fast asleep midway through it.

"But that is a half-truth," SS retaliated. "The complete truth is that he had come back from many quarters dejected and rejected. Many people had said 'No' to him, including Sunil Dutt and Feroz Khan. I'm not sure but maybe Sanjeev Kumar too, had turned down *Kalicharan*. Nobody was willing to work with him. Who would when he hadn't assisted anybody for even a day? The story was

Subhash's and BB Bhalla's (who was also an actor). When he came to narrate the story to me, feeling really dispirited, it was 3.30 am. The point is, if somebody started a narration at 3.30, was it a big deal or a bad deal if I slept halfway through it?"

But SS also sportingly acknowledged that he had erred in not grasping a vital turning point in the film. He acceded, "The climax of the film, NO 17 which is turned around to read as LION, flummoxed me. I wondered if the public would be foolish enough to accept this. Where was the dot between No and 17? But there was something called cinematic license which Subhash Ghai used and the public went for it, making *Kalicharan* a major hit. I would put my questioning the efficacy of NO 17 and LION in the realm of human error and judgement."

However, SS' loyalty test did not hinge on his sleeping through its story narration or his grasp of the climactic No 17. It was tested when the story went to big-time producer NN (Nari) Sippy and he discussed it with SS. It was then that the friend in him surfaced and he lavished praise on it.

"NN Sippy, a major producer those days, asked me point-blank, 'If you think it's such a good subject, will you work in it?'" recalled SS. "I made it conditional that I would do it only if Subhash Ghai was directing it."

It was a dream debut but not a cakewalk for Ghai. "For the first ten reels, the producer kept a watch on how the film was shaping up," SS revealed. "We started shooting on a small scale, with me on a hospital bed all alone, having illusions and hallucinations about NO 17. We had not even decided on its heroine at that stage. For some reason, I was not fond of Reena Roy at that juncture though later, I became far too fond of her!"

That was vintage SS, self-deprecating, tongue-in-cheek and forthright even when he was the target.

He rewound, "Reena and I had worked together (in a commercial dud called *Milaap* in 1972) and we'd had the usual fights that youngsters have. But it had put me off her. It was only because NN Sippy, Subhash Ghai, Reena, her mother, her sister Barkha, all of them met me in my flat at Bandstand to persuade me that I relented and she became my heroine in *Kalicharan*."

The relief of having the right heroine in place almost vanished when NN Sippy threatened to call off the project even after shooting for it. "I have to give credit to Subhash Ghai for somehow completing the film which would have been scrapped after the first schedule itself," SS smiled at the recollection. "During the first schedule, I being a late *lateef*, turned up by 11.30 am for a 9 am shift

while Premnath who had gone to a premiere the night before and had probably spent a wild night, turned up with his *sadhu mandali* (group of saints) around six in the evening. NN Sippy was so livid that he announced pack-up and decided to scrap the entire film. But Subhash Ghai saved the day. Along with ace cinematographer KK Mahajan, he had managed to can quite a few shots with other artistes and had not wasted the day."

The gratifying team effort coupled with box-office triumph led to a partnership – *Vishwanath* was announced with Subhash Ghai, Pawan Kumar and Shatrughan Sinha as partners. "I soon withdrew from the partnership," said SS, indicating that trouble had reared its head. "Misunderstandings arose, not just creative altercations but also budgetary ones, with the film going beyond the allotted figure. With *Vishwanath*, Subhash Ghai had also started becoming a celebrity and I began to see some changes in him."

With both volatile men on the upward march, Subhash was no longer willing to meekly concede ground to SS. The actor charged, "While Subhash had been able to stomach my nature all this while, he found that he couldn't accept it anymore. Subhash Ghai was always short-tempered, especially with technicians, and quick with his *ma-bahen gaali*s (expletives). I often had to intervene and save the staff from his abuses. Subhash started resenting my pulling him up. He never used this language with me, nobody would dare to. But I witnessed his temper tantrums, the abuses, the throwing of things and I would react to it. By the time we did *Gautam Govinda*, our third film together, I had also grown very close to Reena and an element of jealousy cropped up. He was feeling left out. Subhash couldn't take it out on me or on a senior actor like Pran who was also in the film, so he started venting his anger on Reena and other artistes. Of course, anybody who knew Reena would know that she was spirited enough to give it right back to him. She wasn't the kind of girl who would put up with bad behaviour from anybody."

The ego, the woman in between, the growing success, everything combined to pull SS and Subhash apart. SS observed, "We had thought that irrespective of the heroine, every year he and I would make at least one film together. But I think he began to see that I was beyond his control and he developed a complex of his own. If I could do eleven films with Manmohan Desai and nine with Harmesh Malhotra, where was the problem in doing more films with Subhash Ghai who was such a close friend?" he questioned.

"Even today I enjoy Subhash Ghai's company though it is a fact that for at

least ten to eleven years, I have stepped into his house only a couple of times. He has come over, my wife has been to his house and I once got stuck at one of his functions in Pune during *Kisna* (2005)."

It was a function where politicians like Praful Patel were given centrestage which drove the egoistic actor further away from Ghai. This was illustrated in a comment made by SS: "Praful Patel playfully said in his speech, '*Ab* Shatrughan Sinhaji, Subhash Ghai won't make a film with you.' I later told him, '*Ye choice jo hai, Subhash Ghai ki nahin hai* (it is not Subhash Ghai who has the choice). It is Shatrughan Sinha who won't make a film with Subhash Ghai.'

"Ups and downs are a part of politics, so I would quietly laugh at Subhash's shenanigans," smirked SS. "He would call Sharad Yadav or Praful Patel to his functions. He would purposely invite big-time politicians and ask me to come along too, to flaunt his connections," he added.

The fallout was inevitable, given their fiery personalities but they would also come together when it really mattered because they shared an emotional bond that made it impossible to completely break away from each other.

Through it all, Poonam continued with her tradition of tying a *rakhi* (thread tied by a sister on her brother's wrist) to the filmmaker. The brother-sister relationship they shared had gone public when, after the rocky SS-Poonam romance culminated in marriage on July 9, 1980, Subhash Ghai had thrown a party at erstwhile SeaRock Hotel for his 'sister'.

"I have never stopped Promi from tying a *rakhi* to him," SS mulled aloud. "In fact, Subhash and I too, have never had a showdown as such. Just once, at an outdoor shooting in Nashik, he'd come over to my room, had a few drinks, cried a lot, and had tried to raise a hand on me. I had also retaliated."

SS narrated a few trespasses by his friend that had hurt him a lot. One of which was Gulshan Rai's big canvas film, *Vidhaata* with Shammi Kapoor, Sanjay Dutt and Sanjeev Kumar which Subhash Ghai, then a big-ticket director, was helming. "Talks were on for me to do the film and there were a couple of meetings," disclosed SS. "Gulshan Rai was keen to have me in the film when Subhash Ghai said to him, 'Take him at your risk', which was another way of saying that he as the director was not keen to have me in the film. A friend would've said, 'If there is a problem, I'll handle him'. But Subhash did just the opposite."

Given their tumultuous relationship, it would seem that friendship did not always mean standing by each other.

The *Vidhaata* incident pinched but didn't end the friendship. What did dent it was a very personal incident that happened when SS was in a delicate, financial situation. His voice turned uncharacteristically low as he provided details of a temporary financial crisis which turned out to be an unexpectedly unpleasant experience.

When SS was trying to raise the amount he needed for an unnamed but pressing expenditure, he first turned to Poonam to sell off a flat that they owned. She had her reasons for not complying.

"I am very self-respecting and don't like to beg anybody for anything," explained the actor. "But Subhash Ghai advised Promi, 'You're my sister, don't sell your property or your jewellery, ask him to talk to me.' It was a sum of less than Rs 10 lakh but sometimes even Rs 1 lakh can be tough to raise while at other times, Rs 1 crore would be easy. So, much against my wish, I asked Subhash for the money and I got my first shock when he said, 'You'll have to pay me interest on it.' I was taken aback because as friends, we have all given money to one another at some stage or the other. Since when did friends charge interest from each other? But I agreed and he said, 'Okay, I'll talk to someone for it.' I later realised that it was Subhash Ghai's petty act of revenge.

"He kept me dangling for a long time before ultimately telling me that the other person whom he had approached for the money, had said, 'If you want the money, take it but I can't lend it to Shatrughan Sinha.' It was his way of trying to humiliate me when I needed the money. He knew jolly well that he could have simply taken it in his name and given it to me like friends do for one another. But he chose to do this after making me run around him for days."

In sharp contrast was the reaction of another friend called Sanjeev Kumar, the actor with whom SS had shared many a merry evening drinking and dining.

"My friend, philosopher and guide called Sanjeev Kumar who is no more, saw me looking pensive and anxious and asked me what the matter was."

SS' voice rose again as he recalled, "When I told him about my problem, he merely asked me when I would be able to return it. I told him upfront, 'I don't know, whenever I'm in a position to do so.' Lo and behold, his secretary Jamnadasji soon turned up, unannounced, at my place. My staff downstairs had no clue that he was coming, nor did I. Jamnadasji came with something wrapped in a newspaper and said, '*Bhai* (Sir) has sent you a video cassette.' There was no video cassette inside but I found wrapped in it the amount I needed. Sanjeev Kumar had simply sent it across without even telling me about it. When I asked

him what interest he wanted, he had the same philosophy that I had which was, 'Where's the question of interest between friends?'

"I had told Sanjeev, it will be payable when able. Whenever he needed some money, he'd ask me for a portion of it but I have to frankly admit that even today, even as I talk about it, I don't know if I have returned the entire amount to Sanjeev Kumar. Some amount is still pending. But once he passed away, to whom could I have given the money? His estate had been torn apart."

If Poonam watched on and didn't volunteer to sell the flat to raise the money, SS understood her dilemma. "I could not blame Promi at that time because she was very insecure about me. She was hearing too many stories about me from Subhash and some relatives too. If truth be told, I had also gone astray at that time. I have been honest that with stardom and youth, I was seeing glamour and craze which I'd never seen before. Also, I had wanted the money for something that Promi did not want me to spend on. But Subhash Ghai humiliated me in a roundabout way by stopping her from selling off anything. People who knew about this incident felt that this was one occasion when he truly betrayed me."

But the Ghai-Sinha bond was far too rooted in time and strength to completely break, even at this point. They sniped at each other, they stopped working with each other, there was one-upmanship at play but they still loved each other's company.

"He's got a tremendous sense of humour," applauded SS. "But I'd put him in the category of my brothers. For them to see their definition of an *anpad*, the so-called underdog, go places without any contribution from them and where they had no control over me, was difficult to stomach. It was the same with Subhash Ghai. He had no contribution to make in any of my major achievements though the world knows that I had a hand in helping Subhash Ghai's career. And still, when it came to *Vidhaata*, instead of taking me at his risk or giving me money by taking it on his name, his behaviour left a bitter taste in my mouth."

When it came to Ghai, SS' senses were always on the alert. "Once at Olive (a restaurant), I saw my sons Luv and Kussh touch his feet while he looked away indifferently, perhaps inadvertently. After this, I told my sons, 'Respecting a senior is fine, *pranam keejiye* (greet him) but you don't have to touch his feet. He might feel you're doing it for a role in his film or something like that.'"

SS soon moved to Amitabh Bachchan, another friend from the sixties with whom there were evenings of fun, humour, and a few helpings of rancour.

"People say that Amitabh and I made a dynamic pair on screen but if he did

not wish to work with me, if he felt that in *Naseeb*, *Shaan*, *Dostana* or *Kaala Patthar* Shatrughan Sinha *bhari pad gaya* (having Sinha around worked against him), it didn't affect me," he said nonchalantly. "There were so many films that I dropped out of and returned the signing amount. There was a film called *Patthar Ke Log* – one of Prakash Mehra's – written by Salim-Javed...so many films that I gave up without a backward glance because of Amitabh Bachchan. But that doesn't mean I don't respect his personality. I've seen him as a friend, we've worked together as colleagues, we've sailed together in good times and bad, I have good memories also. For that reason, though people say she is short-tempered, you'd never hear me say a word against Jaya Bachchan. I think of her as a family friend. Besides, my clashes with Amitabh have always been issue-based. If I like a performance, I will praise him. But I don't indulge in empty flattery; I'm not in awe of him. For instance, I wouldn't praise his acting in *Paa*. I would praise him for his courage in doing a role like *Paa*, for sitting for hours to get his make-up done, for carrying off such a role. But it didn't require a great actor; it required a great personality which he could impart to the role. On the other hand I thought he was superb in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Black*."

Only a few people know that Amitabh Bachchan (along with Mehmood's brother Anwar Ali with whom he used to stay), Anil Dhawan, Asrani, Subhash Ghai and Shatrughan were all great buddies at one time, and spent several evenings together in Devdoot, the Bandstand apartment. They had so much in common – love for cinema, their struggle and a terrific sense of humour – that late nights would turn into early mornings as they'd all chat animatedly.

"It is true that I also recommended Amitabh for films. I had recommended him to Late Sultan Ahmed," SS said. At the height of his popularity as a villain, SS had done *Heera* and Sultan Ahmed had been grateful that despite his escalating stardom, when the film got delayed, he was the only star who didn't hike his price. "The other actors tend to follow the maxim, 'Different times, different rates'. For me, once my fee was decided, I'd squirm to revise it," he revealed.

During *Heera*, Sultan Ahmed would ask SS, "Where are you roaming around with this camel?" referring to his buddy, Amitabh. But when the camel morphed into a saleable box-office draw, Sultan Ahmed brazenly signed Amitabh Bachchan to topline *Ganga Ki Saugandh* – a film he had promised SS.

SS had much to say about his equation with the Bachchans. "I don't talk about his family members. I think Abhishek and Aishwarya make a very beautiful

couple, God bless them. I also had great respect for Amitabh's parents, Teji Bachchanji and celebrated poet Harivanshraiji," he said, before narrating an incident that brought out Amitabh's spontaneous wit. "When Amitabh had come back from hospital after a near-fatal accident, Promi and I had gone to visit him. We were chatting for a long time with Amitabh resting on his bed when his mother came in and started praising Promi saying, 'Look at her, what a nice girl. She kept so many fasts, observed *karva chauth,* turned vegetarian for so many years and look, God listened to her prayers.' Amitabh heard his mother and said poker-faced, 'Poor thing, after all those fasts, look at what she ultimately got!' He really has a great sense of humour."

Unfortunately, things did go amiss between Amitabh Bachchan and SS.

"During *Shaan*, I had my first experience of dealing with the death of someone close to me when my father passed away. I was in Delhi and that particular day I was really keen to go to Patna to see him, he had been ailing. But my secretary, Pawanji said, 'The set of *Shaan* is ready and waiting.' It was a scene with Raakhee, where there's firing on a bridge. So I came back to Bombay and was having lunch when Jarnail Singh, my late friend who used to rehabilitate drug addicts, came to tell me that my father was no more. I had never seen a dead body from close quarters before this. When my favourite singer Mukesh had passed away, I had gone to his funeral but couldn't muster up enough courage to see his body. It was the same when Meena Kumari had died. My neighbour and filmmaker, Devendra Goel who was God's good soul, lived next door to Ramayan. He had made very successful films like *Ek Phool Do Mali* and *Aadmi Sadak Ka*. I had starred in the latter. When Devendra Goel died, I had gone next door, very scared, and seen a body for the first time. I had forced myself to go and see Devendraji, not in a close-up but in a mid-shot. I had quickly paid my respects and come away. I had to face it full-on a little later in my life when Baba passed away.

"Baba passed away on April 10, 1979. It still seems like yesterday. I went home to Patna, I cried a lot but because of my presence, there was *lathi*-charging at the crematorium, there were crowds and much yelling. Somebody commented, 'What big eyes he has'; someone else wanted to hear a dialogue. It was beyond control. Amma had broken down. She said something that I wrote in my diary: '*Kitna tumhe kandhe pe ghumate thay. Aaj tum unhe kandhe pe le gaye na?* (He used to take you around on his shoulders and today you had to lend your shoulder to his body).'

“I don’t think I’ve cried as much as I did at my father’s funeral. Even when my mother died on April 22, 2002, I didn’t cry as much as I did that day. Perhaps I’d become a little mature by then and I’d already seen death from close quarters. When Sanjeev Kumar died, I was standing for nine hours by his gate. My best friend had died but I didn’t shed a tear. I had matured.”

He didn’t question it but even in his grief he had noted that Amitabh had not paid him a condolence visit when his father had passed on during the shooting of *Shaan*.

SS had a simplistic explanation for what went wrong between Amitabh Bachchan and him when they had so much going between them.

“The problem was the applause I was getting for my performances,” he said shortly. “Amitabh could see the response I was getting. That’s why he didn’t want me in some of his films.”

With a little probing, another angle cropped up – women of course.

“People say that Zeenat Aman or Rekha also contributed a little to the rift,” SS dropped their names slowly. “Maybe they didn’t like something about me and they said something to Amitabh Bachchan, or maybe they said things about me because I knew a lot about them. To strengthen their position, they would be by Amitabh’s side. During *Kaala Patthar*, a heroine who was known to be very friendly with him, would visit him. She would come during *Dostana* also but not once would he bring her out and introduce her to any of us. In showbiz, everybody knew who was visiting whom. The media would immediately know if Reena was in my make-up room. Such things can never be hidden in our world.”

By the time *Kaala Patthar* happened, there was barely any semblance of the friendship that once was. “On the sets of *Kaala Patthar*, the chair next to Amitabh would not be offered to me, nor would his umbrella be ever trained to cover any of us. We’d be heading from the location towards the same hotel but he’d sit in his car and never say, ‘Let’s go together’. I found it all very strange and wondered why this was happening because I never had any complaints against him.”

The stand-off spilled over to the sets. “There was a fight sequence in *Kaala Patthar* which I had been told would be an equal fight,” SS explained. “But along with fight master Shetty who is no more, it was changed to Amitabh beating the hell out of me, beating me constantly until Shashi Kapoor separated us. On this point I had to put my foot down and protest that this was not what had been narrated to me. What if Shashi hadn’t turned up, that means I would’ve

been beaten to a pulp by Amitabh? How did that qualify as an equal fight? Apart from being unfair, it wasn't logical either because, if I was going to be in a one-sided fight, then after interval how was I again shown taunting him the same way I did before the fight? I had to argue this out and shooting was stopped for three to four hours which irked Amitabh."

According to SS, tweaking a scene was not a new trait in Amitabh. It had happened even during *Dostana*. "Once, Amitabh had wanted the scene done in a particular way and Raj Khosla, the director, didn't oblige him. Amitabh had hit out so belligerently, almost abusively, that a senior like Raj Khosla was reduced to tears. Rajji couldn't believe that he could be talked to in such a manner by an actor."

Subhash Ghai's sharp assessment of SS – the warmth, the warts and the wars – presented the other side of the story. "When I met Shatrughan Sinha for the first time, I was playing the hero in three-four films in Bombay. I would often go to Poona to meet my beloved Rehana and I used to go to the Institute to meet the junior students who were very insecure about what would happen to them in the film industry. Being a senior, I used to give them tips on how to conduct themselves in the film world," Ghai mentally visited the fabulous days on the campus.

"At FTII, there was a staircase near the sound department. One day, I was standing there when I looked up and saw a guy coming down the stairs, a tall guy with a very dominating voice talking to the students. My photographs had been published in magazines, so the students knew me. This guy walked up to me and said, 'Subhash Ghaisaab, *hum Shatrughan Sinha hain aur hame khushi hai ki aap hame marg darshan denge film industry mein kaise pravesh karna hai* (I'm Shatrughan Sinha and I'm happy that you are here to guide us on how to get into the film industry),'" Ghai laughed. "When I heard *marg darshan* (guidance), I thought this was definitely the sort of guy who would ask for a favour with full confidence; it would be more in a dominating voice than like a request. I liked him instantly for his honesty. He is today exactly what he was yesterday. I can hardly find any difference in the Shatrughan Sinha I first met and in the Shatrughan Sinha of today, an MP several times over."

Ghai should know because they were practically born together in the film industry. As he put it, "We were born together and we marched together. After one year, he came to Bombay and he happened to meet me in a small *daru ka adda* (liquor den) with some colleagues. He said, 'Subhash Ghaisaab, *kya haal*

hai, hum to ab Bambai aa gaye hai. Dekhte hain ki kaam milta hai ki nahin. Chaliye, ek cigarette to pilayiye hame (How are you? Now I am in Bombay. Let's see if we get work. Meanwhile, at least give me a cigarette).' I had two. I gave him one, lit one for myself and said, 'Welcome to the board of strugglers'."

They became not just strugglers on the same route but firm friends who were there for each other, at least for a while. "We hit it off rather quickly," remembered Ghai. "Both of us lived in different digs in Andheri. He wouldn't call anybody up to his room and would say, 'If anybody wants to meet me, let them call me and I'll come down to see them.' Later on, I came to know that he stayed in a hall comprising six beds and he had one cot over there. He didn't want anybody to see that."

What all of them did see was a strange confidence that none of them ever possessed. It was like a man who knew that popularity was his birthright. He'd shown signs of it at FTII itself. Subhash Ghai recalled, "There was a diploma film of his in which he hits a guy and checks his watch to see if it had stopped. He became instantly popular because of that shot. Maybe it was his unique style of improvisation that fetched him notice. But he also had a very noticeable face; it was a face that made an impact. He had grown a beard at that time to look different from all other strugglers. But what was very strongly seen on his face was his confidence. The rest of us were a bit insecure and slightly naive. His confidence made us laugh, it made us suspicious, *aur achcha bhi lagta tha* (it was appealing too)."

The confidence was illustrated more than once. Ghai spoke of one occasion. "I remember an incident when producer Bhappi Sonie who was a big name then, had seen him at Famous Studio, Mahalaxmi, in a red shirt and beard. He enquired about him, was told he's from the Institute, so he told his production man to bring Shatrughan to him the next day. Bhappi wanted him for a small two-scene role in his film. His production manager made enquiries and finally reached me and I directed him to Shatru's lodge. Four days later, the production manager met me and said, '*Aapka dost jo hai, woh kamaal ki cheez hai* (Your friend is a unique guy). When I went to meet him, firstly, he made me wait for an hour downstairs.' Since the producer wanted to meet him, the production manager had no other choice but to wait for him. An hour later, SS came down and asked, 'Yes, what is it? Where are you from? Bhappi Sonie productions, *haan*?' He spoke of Bhappi Sonie Productions like he knew all about it. The production manager thought, 'He's only a struggler, I'll take him by bus,' but SS

told him, '*Nahin, hum taxi mein jayenge* (We'll take a taxi)', and made the production man pay for it. That was Shatru's first introduction to the film industry and all of us had a good laugh over it.

"Later we came to know that he had indeed got the role in Bhappi Sonie's film. Pran who was a big star was the main villain but Sonu played his boss in two scenes, and he played it in a very dominating manner. We went to the theatre and saw that when he spoke with a roar, people applauded him. That clap did the trick. You know how this industry functions. His name grew wilder and faster. We were very happy for him. I was still struggling to become a hero, working with unknown directors. Sonu began to get work because he wanted to play character roles; he knew it would be tough for him to become a hero at that time. He chose to play the villain, all of us also advised him to do that. But I had told him, 'You can become a top hero one day.'"

The struggler who had insisted on taking a taxi even before he had got a two-scene assignment, zoomed to stardom in a remarkably short period of time.

"After that one film with Bhappi Sonie, he began to get a lot of films. Suddenly he had a secretary called Pawan Kumar who is his secretary to this day. He had friends called Yogi and Bipin who were very attached to him. Within one-and-a-half years, he'd taken his own flat on rent. One thing about him was that he was always cordial and a good friend to his colleagues from the Film Institute. I was also one of them. I was still struggling because some of my films were not working out and he recommended me to filmmakers whenever possible. He got seven-eight films, small producers who wanted to cast him as the main villain. Sonu recommended my name to a producer called Kewal Mishra. He used to recommend Anil Dhawan also, Anil got many films because of Shatru. When Kewal Mishra came to me, I quoted a high price and said, 'I'll only work if you pay me this price.' The producer went away. When Shatru asked me what happened, I said, 'Looking at your confidence, I also got confidence.' So I was heavily influenced by him. But finally, I didn't get that film, and it was Vinod Khanna and Shatrughan Sinha who starred in that film. But he remembered it and would tell me, '*Saala*, you haven't made it yet and you're already acting big.' And I'd tell him, 'But I learnt it from you. You also stayed in a six-bed lodge but made producers wait for you!' We became really close pals. I came to know his mother and his family. When I got married, I didn't have a car, so he sent me his. And he came with all his friends to the wedding. So we've all spent some very beautiful moments together."

By “all”, Subhash Ghai meant the gang of four – Yogi, Bipin, SS and himself. He may have been Shatrughan Sinha to the rest of the world but to them, he was always Sonu. “We knew Sonu well, his strengths and weaknesses, his shortcomings. His strengths were so unique that you could accept his weaknesses,” Ghai made the curious remark. “Like, he could say anything with utter confidence, even if it was wrong. So much so that you wondered what was right and wrong because of the sheer command of his voice, his knowledge of words, his special style of phrasing his lines. He was always a master at it. He would say something like, ‘*Is prayas mein, prayog mein, abhyas mein*... (In this effort, manner, exercise...)’ using three different terms to express the same thing. You’ll notice that even today in his speeches, he’ll use three to four words to emphasise his point. That’s his unique trait.

“I have learnt a lot of things from him but to be honest,” the outspoken friend said, “I also unlearnt a few things from him because we had different approaches to life. I’m the kind who will sit even with my enemies. Shatru would never do that while I’ve always felt that hate and love are temporary emotions.”

Ghai drew the picture of a man who would not fraternise with someone once he went off the person. In this case it was Amitabh Bachchan with whom all of them had begun their star trek in Mumbai.

“I met Amitabh Bachchan through Shatrughan Sinha at his Devdoot flat,” Ghai recalled. “Amitabh had seen my *Umang* and he told me that I’d given a priceless shot as an actor. I liked Amitabh because he had just paid me a compliment,” he added, flashing a sense of humour. “So we all became friends, Amitabh, Anwar, Shatru. But gradually as their careers grew, Amitabh and Shatru had some differences between them. And you know how Shatru is. If he’s indifferent to someone, he can say anything about them to the media, it can hurt a lot. I once told him, ‘Watch *Deewaar*, Amit has given a very wonderful performance in it.’ He turned around and told me, ‘*Abhi kya main* Amitabh Bachchan *se acting seekhoonga* (Now you want me to learn acting from Amitabh)?’ He had and he still has that quality. He would be so bitter, he would not even look at that person’s performance. He’s a man of very strong likes and dislikes, and very strong opinions.” As a matter of fact, SS never did watch *Deewaar* or *Sholay*.

If Subhash Ghai and SS continued to have good times together despite all their career-affecting differences, it was because, “Sonu is like a child. If at all I have not fought with him in spite of many confrontational moments, it’s because

I have seen that child in him. He has harmed himself because of his childish nature but he has a childlike soul too. That's why you see Shatrughan Sinha helping the whole film industry; he's always there when there is a crisis. Whether he is a minister or not, he will always come forward for the community. He likes to play godfather to people. He enjoys it. If you go to him for help, he will genuinely help you."

The child in him also play-acted that he was the boss of the show at all times and basked in the illusion while close friends could see through it. Subhash voiced it by chuckling, "Sonu tries to dominate Poonam but actually he's very scared of her. The moment Poonam gives him one look, he trembles."

While SS outlined the reasons for his friendship with Subhash going haywire, the filmmaker had quite a different set of reasons for the fallout. He was around when SS wooed and won Poonam's heart but he was also a bystander who watched her go through emotional turmoil until her husband came home to roost as a family man.

"When he fell in love with Poonam and they began to go around, I began to consider her my sister," said Subhash Ghai. "But after a few years, I came to know that Sonu was in love with Reena Roy," Subhash analysed the tricky, personal territory. "Reena Roy was my friend too. She'd been my heroine much earlier in a film called *Gumrah* (1976) where I was the hero. Later, she was the heroine of *Kalicharan* also. Initially, Sonu and she used to hate each other but during *Vishwanath* they fell in love. At first, I shrugged it off, saying flirtation is fine; maybe it's the privilege of a hero. But when I realised that it was getting serious, it was the breaking point between him and me. He was dead against me because I batted for Poonam. I had my own values and standards and felt, he cannot do that to Poonam. I stood by her, so I became a person from a different party. To this day, he calls me, *saala* (brother-in-law). So from that day his best friend became his *saala*. But as I said, he's a good human being and at one point he realised what he had to do. He was the first person to call me one night and say, 'Subhash, I'm coming back from London on July 6 and on July 9, I'm getting married, yes, I'm getting married to Promi.' He made his decision and I was very happy. I threw a huge party for them at SeaRock and hosted their wedding reception. I put up a banner on which I'd written, 'Eventually they got married'.

"So, we have been very close despite being two very different people. Every year, I go to their house on *rakshabandhan* for the *rakhi* and *teeka* (rituals on the

day a sister ties a thread on her brother's wrist). In this industry, if you're not working with each other, people forget each other easily because mutual interest has ended. But to his credit, Sonu has always invited me to all his functions and parties, small or big. And I've always seen to it that I attend them to remind myself that once upon a time we were good friends."

What Subhash was unaware of was that he had one evening unintentionally pushed SS to contemplating suicide. It was the one and only time SS had thought of committing suicide. His films hadn't been faring well and he had been coaxed into reluctantly attending one of Subhash Ghai's parties at his apartment in a multi-storey. SS felt out of place, the music kept getting louder, reaching a pitch that was annoying him, and he wanted out. But between Promi and Subhash, they made him stay on. At one point, Subhash also said to him, "Sit quietly and drink," a remark he must have made casually without meaning to hurt his friend. But all the negatives came together when SS looked out of the window and thought of ending it all.

"Fortunately, Promi came around in the nick of time and said, let's go home," SS relived that tense moment. Subhash was oblivious to how close to the brink SS had come that evening.

What he did know was that they had a deep-rooted affection which allowed Subhash Ghai to make an objective study of SS. One of the many qualities he admired in him was the remarkable ability to carry his old friends along, irrespective of their standing in society.

"Even when he had a party after winning as an MP, all his old friends were there," Subhash gave ample credit where it was due. "Shatrughan Sinha never forgets his old friends; it's a rare quality in a film star. I've seen stars call old friends discreetly, separately, quietly at home. But to call them publicly to your party, whether they are poor, they are failures, or they are old, is an outstanding quality. I wish I had that quality but I don't have the guts to call all my old friends because I always wonder how my new ones will interact with them."

Having studied him closely, Ghai was able to pinpoint precisely why fluctuations in his career and life couldn't depose SS from the pedestal on which he had placed himself.

"Shatrughan Sinha will always remain a unique figure in the film industry because you can never write him off," remarked Ghai. "Most stars are easily demoralised. If their films haven't run, or they don't have films on hand, they wilt, *ekdum bujh jaate hai* (they fade away). But even today, Shatrughan Sinha

has a very strong voice, he stands with the same pride, same self-esteem and his dress is as colourful as that of any huge commercial star. Crisis does not demoralise him which is a very important point to learn."

Ghai gave a different reason for sundering their winning partnership as director and actor. "We stopped working together because of our differing work culture."

He said, "After working together in three films (*Kalicharan, Vishwanath, Gautam Govinda*), I told him, 'We're all working for our respective careers. As a director I have evolved in such a way that I need a lot of discipline, lots of planned schedules, timings. Otherwise I won't survive in this industry, my films will suffer.' Being an actor, he could get away with not coming on time, being late, taking certain things lightly. But as a director, I had to be disciplined. Unfortunately, our work culture was totally different. A point came when I had to tell him that we'd have to stop working together. When we broke off, he was a big star with forty films while I had only one. But I preferred to work with newcomers over whom I had some command. Finally, it was a question of my survival."

Ghai was wistful about SS' indisputable talent. "He could've grown and become a really great actor if he had only given more time to his directors," he said. "He evolved in many other spheres but not as an actor whereas some of his contemporaries who focussed on their work reached great heights and are still surviving. But Sonu would react sharply to anybody who advised him to improve himself, to look for something different, to improve his range. He'd say, 'Don't teach me what I have to do.' We began to feel, he respects Shatrughan Sinha more than himself.

"There are two personalities inside Shatrughan Sinha," Ghai analysed. "One is Sonu, the other is Shatrughan Sinha and Sonu has a lot of respect for Shatrughan Sinha. Sonu is an ordinary, simple person who laughs at himself and talks of how he cut his own face. But you cannot touch Shatrughan Sinha, the image. The moment an actor becomes a star, he becomes two people. Sonu is also a victim of that. Shatrughan Sinha the image overwhelmed Sonu the person. Trust me, his potential, the inner actor in him was great. But he kept repeating himself; he didn't really try to portray a different character with a different walk, different voice. So his act became repetitive instead of innovative.

"But I'm glad he's still a celebrity in this country, people still listen to him. He has maintained that celebrity status all these years," he put in the healing touch.

SS turning hero made Hema Malini happy because she struck up an easy and long-lasting friendship with her Juhu neighbour. When Luv Sinha debuted in *Sadiyaan* in 2010, Hema worked in it and indulged him maternally. After all Hema had known SS even when he was a struggler looking for work and she was the undisputed queen of the box-office.

"I like Shatrughan Sinha a lot," twinkled Hema. "When I was doing *Tum Haseen Main Jawan* (1970), Shatru used to be on the sets. He'd be after my mother saying, 'Mummy, get me some work, get me some work.' Then mummy gave him a small role which I'd forgotten about but Shatru always remembered it. It is to his credit that he could work his way up from there to here. It is all totally due to his own personality, the way he carried himself, controversies and non-controversies notwithstanding. Basically, he is a very lovely person and a very fine actor and that is why he has come up from nowhere. Of course, he could have come up much more; he could have grown into a bigger star and actor. Somewhere along the way, I don't know what happened to him career-wise. But it's still a great achievement that he could make such a special name for himself."

Hema Malini was one actress who stood statuesque among the men of the day and got along with each of them on her own terms. She remarked, "Amitabh Bachchan is Amitabh Bachchan and in his time Dharamji was also right on top. After him, Amitabh came and took over. When you look at all this, it was a level that Shatru could not reach. I think that was because of the little controversies here and there that he got into. Also, Shatru has always been very self-willed and doesn't easily relent. I may be wrong in saying this but maybe it was because he had his own conviction about things. At that time Amitabh was so overpowering. And there was competition too."

If straight-talking Hema Malini said it the way she saw it, she also smiled at the way SS would make shooting a breeze for her. "Whenever we worked together on a film, I'd be very relaxed. If it was a day with Shatru, then I knew that we could all go home really fast. *Kuch bhi karke* (Somehow), he would manipulate the producer/director and have pack-up announced early. You couldn't do that with Amitabh, he was always very serious, very punctual. With Shatru you could also go *aramse* (at one's leisure) to the shoot."

It may have been in direct contrast to Amitabh Bachchan's renowned professionalism but Hema saw it as fun times spent together.

"Once," she laughed, "we were shooting in the snow in Shimla when both of

us realised that the director (who shall remain unnamed) was very boring. He was so irritating, he didn't know anything, *kuch nahin aata tha*. Shatru told me to relax and said, 'I'll do something about this.' I wondered what he could possibly do but he somehow managed to convince the director that what we were shooting in Shimla could easily be done in Bombay itself. I've no idea how he managed to do that but he told me, 'Hema, pack-up *ho gaya*, *chalo abhi vapas* (We're done. Let's go home).' I was so happy, I asked him how he did it and thanked him for getting me released from there."

The fact that SS and Dharam got along like siblings added to the comfort level Hema enjoyed with him. In fact, when Hema's brother Jagannath produced a film, he got SS on board. "We worked together in *Sharara*, my brother Jaggu's film. We enjoyed that shooting also," said Hema. "That's around the time I had Esha. Luv and Kussh were born just before her. So Shatru and I were both new parents to our respective kids."

It led to some rather amusing times on the sets, especially when the cameraman or dance director would give instructions by rote. It was customary for them to explain the shot to the hero and heroine using language that went, *"Ladka aur ladki* (the boy and girl) will stand here, the camera will be there."

"Shatru had just become a father to twin sons and I had become a mother and we were being called *ladka aur ladki*?" Hema was tickled at the very memory of those days. "Both of us used to laugh over it."

Such easy camaraderie led to a close association between the two families. "I was the first one to see Luv and Kussh. I was so thrilled to go and see twin babies. At that time I was carrying Esha."

Their bond grew stronger when Hema Malini waltzed into the same political party as SS. The BJP got Hema to come in as a star campaigner, went on to make her a Rajya Sabha member and, for some time, a Vice President of the party, before she won a Lok Sabha seat in 2014 from Mathura.

How did the producer community view this "fun" co-star? Shatru's close friend Pahlaj Nihalani knew him professionally from the time he produced *Hathkadi* (1978) with the actor.

SS was at the peak of his popularity, working in big banner productions like *Naseeb* and *Kranti* and was doing double shifts on most days when Pahlaj signed him for *Hathkadi* which co-starred Sanjeev Kumar, Rakesh Roshan and Reena Roy. It was directed by Surendra Mohan, one of the more saleable names of the seventies. SS was too big a star to discuss mundane details like dates and

timings; his secretary Pawan Kumar took care of the nitty-gritty.

"We knew that he would turn up only in the afternoon, he was never an early bird, so we would finish the rest of the work before he arrived," Pahlaj explained how he had handled the chronic latecomer. "After he reported, we'd even make him sit for a while and have lunch with him. He liked *ghar ka khana*, home-cooked food, and brought his tiffin carrier with him. Since we were mentally prepared for his latecoming, we were cool and relaxed, and we made the film without tension."

Like most of his producers who enjoyed repeating him in their movies, Pahlaj made nine films with SS and knew his moves first-hand.

"As an actor, I never saw his decline," reported Pahlaj. "In 1989, when I made *Aandhiyaan* with Mumtaz and Sonu, I remember he would leave immediately after shooting for campaigning. We were shooting in Kufri and those days there were no chopper facilities for celebrity campaigners. A car would come to fetch him and he would rush after pack-up, drive for twelve hours, go from place to place and hit the campaign trail with sincerity. His attention got diverted to politics when he was still busy as an actor. In 1987-88, he did *Khudgarz* which was a superhit. I was one of the distributors of the film and I know what a big hit it was. After 1989, he worked half-heartedly because his attention was on politics and after 1992, he stopped signing films. After *Khudgarz* I have myself paid him a fee of Rs 10 lakh which was a huge huge sum those days. At a time when Dharmendra was charging Rs 15 lakh, I know that Sonu's price went up to Rs 30 lakh for *Kanoon Kya Karega* with Jayaprada and for another film in the South. So he joined politics when he was at the peak."

Pahlaj felt that SS' preoccupation with politics played spoilsport with his acting career to some extent. "As long as he was an actor, if he fetched up hours late, nobody gave it a second thought. But after he went into politics, producers began to fear him, wondering whether he would turn up at all."

The fear was unfounded. There was an incident during the shooting of *Aandhi Toofan* (1985) which convinced Pahlaj about his friend's sense of commitment.

"Sonu had checked and double-checked with me that I would not need him for shooting before leaving for New York to bring in the New Year there," Pahlaj recounted the incident. "But suddenly we found that we had just two or three days' shooting left with Danny who was not going to be available for the next three months after that. And we needed Sonu in those shots with Danny."

In the eighties, mobile phones had not even been invented when Pahlaj

managed to get through to SS who was lunching at a restaurant in NY. “I requested him to please fly down and shoot because I was getting Danny’s dates all of a sudden. Of course, he said, ‘Nothing doing, I had checked with you before leaving Bombay.’ I said, ‘Please come. Next year I will take you to New York myself for New Year celebrations.’ I somehow convinced him to return. He too realised that my film would get delayed by months if this shooting was left incomplete. But he warned me that after coming back, if for some reason I didn’t go ahead with the shooting, he wouldn’t let me hear the last of it. There was no way I was going to cancel it; I had made sure everything was in place before even requesting him to come back.

“So he flew back. Danny and he were also working together on another film called *Ramkali*, a Ratan Mohan production. On the day of my shooting, Danny was doing double shifts, reporting for *Ramkali* first and then mine. While giving a shot for *Ramkali* at Chandivali Studio, he had to jump. Danny jumped and landed on a huge rusty nail which went through his foot. There was no way Danny could shoot for anybody after that accident. He was laid up in bed for weeks.

“I sat before Sonu, completely bereft of words. What could I possibly tell him when he had flown back from NY only for this shoot? He saw my condition and burst out laughing. He laughed and laughed at my predicament, and said, ‘It’s okay. We’ll go back to New York next year!’ There was no tension, no anger, no irritation in him. He took the whole incident in his stride. Of course, we went to New York several times after that. In 1998, we went twice in three months to the US.”

There were many such stories that endeared the man to his producers and colleagues, incidents that offset his latecoming or his stubbornness.

Pahlaj had much to say about SS’ renowned warmth with the comman man. “Whether at an airport or a hotel, he will always be a people’s person, making time for everyone, ready to pose for a photograph or give his autograph,” said Pahlaj who had traversed the globe with his friend. “He remembers each and every person’s name, however long back he may have met him. He knows every security person, he knows IAS officers, their batch and cadre. He is quite an amazing man.”

Years ago, after shooting for a film somewhere in Rajasthan with Rishi Kapoor, SS and a few others, bad man Gulshan Grover had returned and talked about several important bureaucrats and socially well-placed people who had

visited the shoot. But while the other actors had interacted with the guests with surface politeness and gone away unimpressed, Gulshan noticed that SS had taken the trouble to befriend each of them, had exchanged phone numbers and accorded them the respect that each of them deserved. Among Hindi film stars who are notoriously insular and honestly believe that the world outside films is manned by an inferior race of people not worth cultivating, SS' interest in and respect for officials of all hues was indeed a rarity. Contrary to his screen branding, Gulshan himself was an educated, well-spoken and socially-aware man who noticed SS' networking outside the realm of films and appreciated its importance.

BJP stalwart LK Advani's daughter and TV show host Pratibha, chipped in with her observations as well. She knew him closely enough to call him Sonu.

SS was the man behind the one and only time that Pratibha Advani faced the camera as an actor. She did a few episodes of a TV serial called *Devata* in which she played a journalist. "So I was myself in it," she explained. "It was during the initial stages of my career on TV (as show host) and I did it for kicks. Sonu was the central character and I was a sidey in it but we did shoot a few scenes together. I used to start laughing when he'd *maro* (deliver) a dialogue for a shot, and we'd have to re-do it. But it was a nice experience."

It was when Pratibha had SS opposite her as a celebrity-interviewee on her show that he showed he was more than just a film star. Like most TV anchors around the world, Pratibha used to keep before her a paper with helpful little notes when doing an interview. "I never really looked at it but it was always there for comfort, as a backup," she remembered. "The biggest of anchors all over use a paper because you need facts and figures before you. But one day Sonu asked me, 'Why do you have that paper in front of you? You don't need it.' That day onwards, I have never placed a paper before me on any of my shows/interviews and believe you me, it works beautifully.

"I once interviewed Mr Amitabh Bachchan for an hour-and-a-half, I knew a lot about him, I'd read three books on his life. I had a wonderful conversation with him without any prompting from a paper. I'd credit Sonu for that improvement in my career. He just said, '*Mat rakho paper* (Don't keep any paper)' and that really helped me."

Like Pahlaj and wife Kantu who had a fraction of an edge over the others in their friendship with the Sinhas because they were Sindhis like Poonam, the Advanis too warmed up to the star's family. Pratibha made a passing reference to

it when she said, “Sometimes I would tell Poonam, ‘I haven’t had Bihar *ka machchi* (fish) for a long time,’ and she’d have it made and sent across to me. The fact that she was a Sindhi made us all that much closer.

“Sonu is comfortable with the entire family. He feels comfortable enough to ask, ‘*Arbi banao, mirchi khaoonga* (Make colocasia, give me green chillies)’ or a particular clear veg soup that my mother would make. He had his set menu whenever he’d come over. I must mention that lately we haven’t met as often as we used to,” she added.

Pratibha had her personal reasons for welcoming SS into her political family. “He has always been complimentary about Dada (her father, LK Advani), and it warms my heart when he talks about my father with so much affection. There are times when somebody says something negative about Dada and then Sonu will come up with something nice about him which makes us feel good.

“Sonu is one of the few actors who have been consistent in politics. He also wakes up early now which politicians need to do,” she smiled. “For the longest time, I never knew Sonu to do that. So I think he has fit into the slot better than ever. He has also become punctual which is very important. Also, the fact that he has stuck it out in politics speaks well for him.”

Like her famous dad, Pratibha didn’t relish focusing on the negative but she did point out one trait that she hoped SS would look into and correct.

“Sometimes I feel he’s a little gullible, he believes anybody and everybody,” she said. “He won’t dissect what has been said, he’ll just accept it. It’s actually not such a bad quality to trust people who you think are your friends and well-wishers. But in a public sphere, perceptions are different,” she put it mildly.

Pahlaj Nihalani swung the spotlight back to his redeeming qualities: “Sonu is a thinker, a good listener and a very good reader. However late he may wake up, the first thing he does in the morning is to read the papers, watch all the news channels, collect all the information on what’s happening in the world. His TV set is always switched on to catch the latest news bulletins.”

He also noticed that for a man who liked the sound of his own voice, SS made a patient listener. “He likes to collect everybody’s opinion before he forms his own,” Pahlaj noted, contradicting Pratibha’s comment on him. “On stage too, he doesn’t follow a script, doesn’t do homework. Instead, he’ll listen keenly to every speaker before him, gauge the audience mood and deliver a speech appropriate for the occasion, incorporating all the points that must be addressed. That’s one of the reasons he makes a wonderful orator.”

Pahlaj laughed that in spite of all the changes swirling around his life, SS' one big priority in life was food. Where to have his lunch and dinner, and with whom, were vital details he liked to plan in advance. "Whichever part of the world he may be in, he only likes meeting people at someone's home, at a restaurant or in his hotel."

Most times when he partied, he'd have a drink or two with a few *hors d'oeuvres* and, if the main meal was interesting, he'd have it packed to eat it at home or in his hotel room, wearing his shorts and watching television – a sight nobody but his close family was privy to.

Over the years, the foodie's portions shrank and SS became a small eater. But one food habit known to every chef in every hotel that he patronised, and every host whose house he went to, was the mandatory side plate of fresh green chillies. SS could never relish a meal without crunching into a green chilli in between his food.

It prompted Poonam to remark, "If he were to ever fight an election independently, his symbol could be a green chilli."

Whenever SS travelled, he rarely stayed with anybody, preferring hotel suites to even his brothers' houses in the US or the UK.

"He doesn't like staying with people unless they know his habits," Pahlaj explained, "because he likes staying on his own terms. He doesn't go alone anywhere in the world, he likes taking his own people everywhere. It's his weakness. So until and unless his host has room for two or three of his guests also, he won't go and stay with anyone."

His constant host in Chicago, Dr Upendra Sinha explained, "The house in which I live is big. He's welcome to come and stay with his friends. If he didn't stay with me I'd feel something was slipping away, *chhoot raha hai*, from my life."

The surgeon pointed out that SS collected and kept friends forever. When he gave a speech at the UN, he invited Dr Upendra Sinha to join him. SS' friends reciprocated his affection by going the extra mile for him even if they came off as *chamcha*s.

"People will call it *chamchagiri* (sycophancy). But they don't realise the depth of our friendship. He's my No 1 best friend," put forward the surgeon.

Bharat believed that SS was a *yaaron ka yaar*, friend of friends. But he also believed that SS would have achieved much more in life, "If he had channelised

all his energies on himself, instead of on the people around him."

Dr Upendra Sinha agreed as he observed, "He is a very rich man but he could've made much more. He's always been too dependent on people around him. Shatrughan's biggest drawback has been that he has never made out a cheque in his life. His accounts would have been totally mismanaged if it hadn't been for Promi who is the financial brain in his family."

Disagreeing with brother Bharat's observation, SS guffawed, "I follow my dashing and dynamic Prime Minister's credo of '*Sabka saath, sabka vikas* (Progress by taking everybody along with you)'."

Pahlaj talked of SS' quiet achievements, and particularly about the film world's long fight for recognition as an industry which was finally won because of the actor-politician's efforts.

"When the BJP was newly elected in Maharashtra, Sonu had pushed through the film industry's demand for industry status. Through Yashwant Sinha and Sushma Swaraj, he got us recognition as an industry."

The multiplex culture that overtook traditional cinema houses was also traced to SS.

"In 1998, on our two trips to the US, I got the idea of starting multiplexes in India," claimed Pahlaj. "We also drew up a proposal for a five-year tax holiday for new multiplexes. At that time, people were coming up with all kinds of roadblocks like, where would we get the land for malls and multiplexes? The multiplexes that one sees all over the country came up because of Sonu and me. For the first time, in the annual budget, the film industry was gifted at least a piece of the financial cake by Yashwant Sinha through the efforts of Mr Shatrughan Sinha. I was President of AMPTPP (Association of Motion Picture & Television Programme Producers) at that time. I would gather the industry's concerns and take them to Sonu who would do his best to have them addressed by the concerned Ministry."

Although he worked for the film industry, Pahlaj was saddened that SS was often misunderstood by both the worlds that he inhabited. "Politicians feel he's an actor while the film industry thinks he's a politician and he's sandwiched between the two," commented Pahlaj.

A senior film industry colleague who could talk with authority was writer Salim Khan, father of Salman Khan and the first half of the estranged but once formidable writer-team known as Salim-Javed. The success of *Dabangg* may

have spotlighted Sonakshi's friendship with Salman Khan's family but the Bandstand Khans and the Sinhas of Juhu were known to each other long before that. Salim Khan and SS shared a rare and close friendship for over four decades.

"As an actor, in his era, Shatrughan Sinha was the only original actor we had," Salim Khan astutely observed. "Most actors were influenced by Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar and Dev Anand. Even the biggest of them, Amitabh Bachchan, Anil Kapoor and Naseeruddin Shah were influenced by Dilip Kumar. Rajendra Kumar used to obviously copy Dilip Kumar. Some others have followed Raj Kapoor and Shammi Kapoor also.

"All over the world, actors influence one another. Raj Kapoor was greatly influenced by Charlie Chaplin in his style of talking, walking, acting, even in the kind of characters he played. Dev Anand was highly influenced by Gregory Peck. Initially, their mannerisms were very similar. When Shatrughan Sinha came, he could easily have followed one of the stalwarts. For an actor to imitate any style or mannerism is child's play. Shatrughan Sinha probably came around the same time as Amitabh Bachchan and other actors. But he came with his own original style of dialogue delivery. The confidence he had even when he was a nobody, was tremendous, it was unbelievable.

"There is a line from Marlon Brando's book *(Anatomy Of An Actor)* where he says, 'Acting is the easiest job in the world if you are a success'. But Shatrughan Sinha had that confidence even without tasting success. He exuded it even when he was doing a small cameo role. I have always admired Shatrughan Sinha for it, for evolving a style of his own."

Salim Khan had done his research and analysis well as he compared Shatrughan Sinha's originality (which spawned a dozen me-toos, especially in South India) with that of his own superstar son.

"This quality of being an original is something that Salman also has," remarked the proud father. "Salman has never followed Dilip Kumar or Raj Kapoor or Dev Anand or Amitabh Bachchan. Similarly, Shatrughan Sinha had his own style whether you liked it or you didn't like it."

Salim further noted, "Shatrughan Sinha had a very strange way of delivering his dialogues. Normally, there is a certain meter that is followed in dialogue delivery where emphasis is to be on certain words only. But Shatrughan Sinha would emphasise some other word and pull it off with aplomb. The breaks in his dialogue were different from what was conventionally accepted."

Warming up to the topic, Salim Khan analysed SS' personal traits.

“Another quality I like in Shatrughan Sinha is that he never forgets to be grateful. He remembers a good turn and appreciates it.”

Drawing a contrast between SS and Amitabh Bachchan, Salim Khan described an incident which dated back to the days of the Salim-Javed written film *Kaala Patthar*.

“When we were writing *Kaala Patthar*, we had the main characters already in our minds. Of course Amitabh Bachchan was always before us for the main role, Shashi Kapoor was there for the pleasant, romantic role of an engineer. And Shatrughan Sinha was clearly in our mind when we wrote the character of an escaped convict who could open any lock in the world and was hiding in the coal mines,” the writer revealed how they’d visualised their script. “For every character we had given some very distinctive dialogues. Shatrughan Sinha’s role was pretty interesting; it had been written keeping in mind his image. Dialogues like, ‘*Teesra badshah kahan hai* (Where’s the third king in your trio of cards)?’ ‘*Abbe, teesra badshah hum hai* (Hey, the third king is me),’ were written with Shatrughan Sinha in mind.

“Amitabh Bachchan had spent his initial period in the industry with Shatrughan Sinha. Shatru used to recommend Amitabh to people and they even shared the same secretary, Pawan Kumar. It was ‘Sonu, Sonu’ and ‘Amit, Amit’ between them. I don’t know what differences cropped up between them or whether there were any differences. But I do know that somewhere Amitabh owed Shatrughan,” commented Salim. “However, if anybody really opposed Shatrughan’s inclusion in *Kaala Patthar,* it was Amitabh Bachchan and he recommended many other names in his place,” he disclosed, as he went on to describe the machinations that went on during the making of *Kaala Patthar*.

“In those days, who could afford to offend Amitabh Bachchan? Whether it was Yash Chopra or anyone else, they needed Amitabh Bachchan for their films; he had become a larger-than-life star. But I put my foot down and said, ‘For this film, it will be only Shatrughan Sinha in that role.’ So they started devising ways and means of ensuring that Shatrughan himself rejected the role. They offered him a humiliatingly low price. They were told that he always comes late, so they told him that they wanted him on the sets at a really early time. They started dictating such terms that Shatrughan would be provoked to say, ‘*Bhaad mein jao, mujhe nahin karna* (To hell with you, I don’t want to do your film).’

“I realised what they were all up to, so I quietly told Shatrughan, ‘This role was written for you, it will benefit you. Out of the four-five important roles of

your life, this will be one of them. Whatever they say, accept their terms. Don't think of it as a compromise, think of it as a strategy. If they call you at 5 am, say, 'OK'. Even if they offer you no money, say, 'I'll do it because Salimsaab has asked me to do this role.' Put all the blame on me but do this role.' So, all their schemes to get him out of the film failed. I am a living witness to all this manipulation. It means even the biggest actor had certain fears from Shatrughan Sinha as far as performance was concerned. They knew he was a scene stealer. At some stage every actor has feared sharing screen space with Shatrughan Sinha. I was an eyewitness to this and by the grace of God I have to this day a very good memory. Let anybody deny it, they all have convenient memories," he gave a short laugh.

"So, there was a lot of opposition to Shatrughan and attempts were made to block his entry into the film. He was aware that I had taken a clear stand on this. I felt, this was written for him, if any actor had a *chhattees ka akhaada* (problem) with him, it was fine, they didn't have to forge a relationship with him for life."

However, Salim and SS forged one of their own. In an industry which drove its inmates into barbed wire camps, after the Salim-Javed split, Javed Akhtar was seen as aligned with Amitabh Bachchan. Salim stayed steadfastly out of it.

SS had already referred to the uneasy shooting of *Kaala Patthar* which was often tempestuous as he had strode into territory where an 'Unwelcome' mat had been clearly laid out for him. To his credit, he not only stayed on to finish his job but also didn't let the tension affect his performance as he did fetch the expected applause for a role that had been written for him.

"Shatrughan *ne thoda sa khoon ka ghoont peeke kaam kiya, lekin kaam bahut achcha bhi kiya* (Shatrughan had to swallow his pride a bit but he delivered a stellar performance)," Salim Khan acknowledged the actor's inner struggle. This was one time SS, guided by a well-meaning Salim Khan, put aside his natural tendency to let his self-respect and ego override pragmatic requirements. It was a small skirmish lost to win a bigger battle.

"Shatrughan remembers all this to this day," Salim Khan said appreciatively. "I have the faith that if I were to ever call him over at night, or even send a message to him, he will be there for me. I will never misuse the respect and affection he has for me but I have the confidence that whether he is in Patna or America or England, if I tell him I have some work with him and I need him, he will never turn me down. He is not an ingrate, *ehsaan faramosh aadmi nahin*

hai. It doesn't mean that I did him any favours. *Ehsaan na maanna ghatiya hai aur ehsaan jatana bhi ghatiya hai* (To forget a favour is lowdown, to make a person feel obliged is also condemnable). But I felt very strongly about *Kaala Patthar* and I was morally convinced that no actor had the right to do the casting or decide that this actor should not work in my film. It is the prerogative of the writer who has conceived it and that of the director. Ironically, it was precisely on this issue that Amitabh Bachchan had come into *Deewaar*. The producers had originally signed Rajesh Khanna for the role but as the writers, we had said that this film is for Amitabh Bachchan, we have written it for him. It suited Amitabh Bachchan at that time, our stand was considered correct then. But when it didn't suit people, they found our stand inconvenient, we became the villains," snorted Salim Khan.

With all his unique qualities, if SS didn't clamber up the stardom ladder as high as Amitabh Bachchan, Salim Khan, an inveterate cricket addict, made his analysis with an analogy from his favourite game.

"I personally feel that talent and discipline make an awesome combination," said Salim Khan. "People are either very disciplined but very mediocre, or they are very talented but laidback. Salim Durrani was a very talented cricketer but the amount of discipline that Tendulkar brought with him was unbelievable. Salim Durrani had much more talent than Sachin. He was a world-class bowler; he was a world-class batsman. Shatrughan Sinha is like that. Highly talented but less disciplined. Amitabh Bachchan is far more disciplined. Like Pransaab was very disciplined, always on time. Madhubala had both qualities – she was very disciplined and a good actress too. Those who have reached the peak have been immensely talented and have been very hard-working and disciplined, like Amitabh Bachchan," he said objectively. "Normally, a talented person feels, why should I work so hard, why slog, why do homework, I can handle it in a trice. During dubbing, Shatrughan Sinha would take a one-page dialogue and finish it in minutes. His memory for remembering faces and people and incidents, was always phenomenal. And his friends have been with him for years."

He changed tacks at this juncture and moved on to further dissect Shatrughan's personality.

Said Salim Khan, "Someone once asked Mahesh Kaul, the filmmaker, 'What's the *pehchan* (mark) of a good man?' His answer was, 'Lots of things but one simple way to recognise a good man is to check if his friends are *purana* (old) and his servants are *purane*.'" With that Salim Khan underscored his opinion on

SS as a very good human being.

“He has respect for his roots. His loudness hides a rather endearing man,” Salim went on. “He is not the sort who will say one thing to your face and another behind your back. If he likes you, he’ll praise you behind your back too. *Aur khulke burayi bhi karega* (He’ll openly criticise you too). A man who is diplomatic, has no opinion to offer, and is noncommittal, is the most dangerous species. As a person, Shatrughan Sinha is far better than most of the people I have known and he makes a very reliable friend.”

While Salim Khan provided the wise voice of experience, informative notes came from the deep, rich voice of FTII junior, Raza Murad, an inveterate SS-watcher.

“When Shatrusaab was a student, none of his classmates saw him as star material,” Raza noted. “He was wiry thin, did not have conventional good looks and he was a dark horse. He was clearly the underdog. Actor Rakesh Pandey who was his senior, told me that initially Shatrusaab had quite a pronounced Bihari accent. There was a movement class at FTII where you had to move to the mood of the music played and express yourself through your body. One day Shatrusaab told Rakesh Pandey to come and see his class and he said, ‘*Hum aapko hamare movement dakhlayenge* (I’ll show you my moves).’ He said, ‘*dakhlayenge’* instead of ‘*dikhlayenge*’. It is to his credit that one of the areas where he really worked on himself was his pronunciation and dialogue delivery which went on to become the hallmarks of his stardom.

“At FTII, the Direction students had to make a diploma film each and most of the cast used to be taken from the acting class. As is done in Mumbai where you try to keep your directors in good humour, at FTII also, it was a somewhat similar scenario. But Shatrusaab, even then, never really cultivated any of the Direction students, he never went out of his way to please anybody. So he was one Acting student who did not get any notable roles in any of the diploma films. He did a small role in a diploma film called *The Train*. His classmate, the Late Vipin Kumar Bhandula (father of Omung Kumar, director of National Award-winning film *Mary Kom*) who was tipped to become a future star, and Rehana Sultan who was a year senior to him, had the lead parts in *The Train*. Shatrusaab had the role of someone in a waiting room who was sitting and smoking, blowing rings in the air. He had just that one shot in the film.

“Because he didn’t have a notable role, a special diploma film was made for him. The director of the film was Firoze Chinoy (who later made the feature

films, *Shaitaan* and *Do Raha* with Shatrughan Sinha), the cameraman was Manjul Prabhat and it was called *And Unto The Void*. He played the role of a condemned convict and, for someone whose deep voice became a trademark, he had no dialogues in the entire film. He was so impressive in it that when Raj Kapoor who had been called by FTII as examiner, saw his film, he gave him 100 out of 100 which was a record.

"I have *And Unto The Void* to this day with me in my collection of films. I have all these facts on Shatrusaab because I have been a huge fan of his. I have watched him closely and noted every detail about him right from the beginning.

"In 1967, he came to Bombay. In the evenings, he would go with his friends and sit at Gaylords, a restaurant in Churchgate, where music director Jaikishan, filmmaker Bhappi Sonie and actor Kishen Dhawan would have their sessions. Shatrusaab had such an impressive walk and confidence that when he entered a place, people would turn around and look at him. He had that quality right from the beginning, his attitude always attracted attention.

"There was a serial killer and psychopath called Raman Raghav who was on the loose those days and the whole city of Bombay was in the grip of fear. Shatrughan Sinha had grown a beard and one day when he was strolling down Linking Road, some people mistook him for Raman Raghav. He had to run for his life as the public ran after him. Fortunately, he got into a friend's car and escaped.

"There are three films that claim to have introduced Shatrughan Sinha. One of them was *Ek Nanhi Munni Ladki Thi*.

"The second film that 'introduced' him was Mohan Saigal's *Saajan*, starring Manoj Kumar and Asha Parekh, with Raj Mehra playing the chief cop. Shatrusaab played his assistant, Inspector Tiwari. He had a small part in it and he got the credit title, 'Introducing SP Sinha'. On the sets he got upset with Asha Parekh and he went into the make-up room and cried like a child. Something on the sets had hurt him a lot.

"The third film was Dev Anand's *Prem Pujari*. It was the cameo performance of a Pakistani colonel and he was brilliant in it. Shatrusaab was so impressive in it, it was as if a Muslim was speaking Urdu. From '*dakhlayenge*' he had travelled to becoming completely authentic in his portrayal of an Urdu-speaking Pakistani colonel.

"Devsaab was so impressed with him that he worked with him again in Amarjeet's *Gambler*. There was a confrontation scene between them and while

filming it, Shatrusaab, with all the enthusiasm of a newcomer, caught hold of Devsaab's collar and said something to him which had not been written. Amarjeet called 'cut' and scolded Shatrusaab for doing what he did to Devsaab. In turn, Devsaab scolded Amarjeet and said to him, 'He's in the character, let him continue. Why did you cut the shot?' Devsaab realised that he was not being disrespectful to him but to his character and the scene demanded what he did. This must've been during the time he was mistaken for Raman Raghav because he had grown a big beard for the film."

Apart from illustrating Dev Anand's sporting side, the incident also underlined just why SS was making his unique presence felt wherever he went.

"There were other minor roles he did in small films. One was called *Mehmil*, another was *Raaton Ka Raja* with Dheeraj Kumar as the hero. There was one more film called *Paanch Dushman*.

"The turning point in his life was the film *Khilona*. He had a close friendship with Mumtaz who also liked him a lot. He used to call her 'Rani'. Villain Manmohan was approached for a role in *Khilona* and he had demanded something like Rs 50,000 which was not acceptable to the producer. On Mumtaz's recommendation, Shatrughan Sinha was signed for that role and that brought him into the limelight. He began to get substantial roles in good films like *Paras, Ganga Tera Pani Amrit, Chetna, Dost, Babul Ki Galiyan, Banphool, Raaste Ka Patthar, Bhai Ho To Aisa, Shart, Raampur Ka Lakshman, Do Raha, Mere Apne, Do Yaar* and many more.

"Shatrusaab had a soft corner for FTII students and always promoted them. When Ram Dayal made *Do Raha,* he did it free of cost for him because Firoze Chinoy was directing it, Radha Saluja and Anil Dhawan who acted in the lead were FTII actors, the cameraman, the whole crew was from FTII. By that time, he had become a major star and he promoted Anil Dhawan in a very big way. He did many films with him like *Chetna, Samjhautha, Ghulam Begum Badshah* and BR Ishara's *Man Tera Tan Mera*. He did a film called *Ek Nari Do Roop* because both its heroines, Rashmi (who became Mrs Anil Dhawan) and Asha Sachdev were from the Film Institute. Then he promoted Zarina Wahab by doing a film called *Anokha* with her. He worked with Asha Sachdev again in *Kashmakash*. He did *Dhokebaaz* for director Jarnail Singh who was his friend from the FTII days."

Raza also highlighted the impact SS had on the screen by pointing out that in Jaya Bhaduri's debut film, *Guddi*, "When they showed the various films that

Guddi goes to see, there were shots of Amitabh Bachchan from *Parwana*, Navin Nischol from *Nadaan*, Dilip Kumar from *Phir Kab Milogi* and Shatrughan Sinha from *Mere Apne*. They showed Shatrusaab's scene on a motorbike where he asks, *'Kyun beta, is sham akele akele aish kar raha hai? Naam pata kya hai, ata pata bata ladki ka* (Hey, young man, having a good time on your own? Come on, give me the name and address of the girl).' When that shot was flashed in *Guddi*, the applause from the audience was deafening. He truly was the only villain in film history the audience found endearing enough to cheer for him. He did a small guest role in the Navin Nischol-Amitabh Bachchan starrer *Parwana*, as the public prosecutor in a court scene. It was a surprise for the audience because his name had not been announced in the film. The moment he appeared on the screen, there was thunderous applause. He was the first and so far the last villain to have that kind of thrilling impact on his audience, an aura of his own.

"Shatrughan Sinha is an 'actortainer' who entertains you through his acting. In later years I would count Govinda in that category. Shatrusaab did films with Manmohan Desai like *Bhai Ho To Aisa* where he had an outstanding entry. He was given a mass appeal entry in *Raampur Ka Lakshman* also and he had a dramatic entry in *Aa Gale Lag Ja* in which he played a doctor. Manmohan Desai was a very intelligent director; he knew what the masses wanted. He knew how to harness Shatrughan Sinha's popularity and cashed in on it.

"Shatrughan Sinha became a compulsive show stealer," commented Raza Murad as he traced the reasons the ace villain moved towards lead roles. His analysis balanced Pawan Kumar's criticism over SS turning hero. "Those days there was a lot of one-upmanship and a common expression used by film people was, *is actor ne us actor ko kha liya* (one actor has upstaged the other). About Shatrusaab, it was invariably said that he had demolished his co-actors, *kha gaya*. To survive in this industry, he had to become a lead player and be able to carry a film on his own shoulders. Otherwise, his contemporaries would have never allowed him to progress. They didn't want him to be around in a prominent role, they detested being dominated by him. Because he had been accepted wholeheartedly as a villain, people felt it was a mistake for him to have turned hero. But it was a very wise step. And although he was no singing, dancing hero, he had his loyal audience. *Badla, Shaitaan, Jaggu,* with good saleable heroines of the day like Moushumi Chatterjee, Sharmila Tagore, Leena Chandavarkar and *Do Thug* with Hema Malini established him in the hero's slot. He also did Ravee Nagaich's *Thief Of Baghdad*, a costume drama. *Sabak* was with Poonam Sinha and *Milaap* in which he was an *ichchadhari naag* (shape-

shifting serpent) was with Reena Roy. There was *Kashmakash* in which he even sang a song with Asha Bhosle.

"In *Safed Haathi,* he played a maharaja, he looked very impressive and imposing in a jodhpuri and long boots. Tapan Sinha had directed it. He did *Kotwal Saab* with Hrishikesh Mukherjee where both of us played police officers. Hrishida used to hate long hair. So before a schedule, both of us would go and cut our hair to look like authentic police officers. This was one film where Shatrughan Sinha would always come on time. Aparna Sen was the heroine. But *Kotwal Saab* faced a lot of upheavals. The Emergency was clamped, censorship became strict, the script, the subject had to change according to the changing demands of the censors. The film suffered as a result and did not make the desired impact.

"Shatrusaab had a very good rapport with Sanjeev Kumar. Both of them had one thing in common – they loved good food. When they were doing *Bereham* with Mala Sinha and Reena Roy, the lunch served was always high on the agenda.

"He worked with a cross-section of actors. He did four films with Raaj Kumar: *Chambal Ki Kasam, Sharara, Betaaj Badshah* and *Mahaveera* but they never struck up a close friendship. Raaj Kumar was aloof and eccentric and Shatrusaab was not the kind to suck up to anybody. I did *Mahaveera* with them and, although they were pitted against each other, director Ramesh Saigal managed to make the film without taking even one single combined shot of the two of them. Each had a different timing for turning up for shooting.

"Shatrusaab has also worked with Dilip Kumar in *Kranti*," Raza continued to chronicle SS' life and times. "He had the very strong role of Karim Khan, a bearded Muslim character and he had a popular song, 'Chana Jor Garam' picturised on him. He did another film with Manoj Kumar, *Santosh* which took twelve years to reach the theatres. Every year, the producer, Balbir Kumar would issue a full page ad in *Screen*. This was one film where Shatrusaab put his foot down. What had been narrated to him was not what was being shot, his character was taking a villainish turn and that was not what he had signed the film for. So he stood his ground and refused to shoot until they changed their script and shot the film as it had been narrated to him."

SS' notorious indifference to punctuality had its amusing side too. Raza recalled, "When we were shooting for Rajkumar Kohli's *Jeene Nahin Doonga* in which I played his brother, Shatrusaab would turn up late for shooting as usual.

Rajkumar Kohli had the habit of chewing his fingernails when he was tense. One day when he was running really late, Shatrusaab told his driver, 'Move fast before he reaches his toe nails,'" chuckled the co-star.

Raza the admirer turned into a critic over Shatrughan's politics. "When he joined the BJP, Muslim fans got a big jolt. Shatrusaab has never uttered a word against Muslims or ever been anti-minority. So they felt let down when he joined a party that was perceived as communal."

What SS actually practised was an ideology of his own because he often turned on his own party members in public. He may have stuck with the BJP for a long time but he never really toed the party line if he didn't agree with it on a principle. Raza had noted that as well.

"When George Fernandes had to resign after a sting operation on him by *Tehelka*, he had said that he would come back to the Cabinet only after his name was cleared. However, he returned as Minister much earlier," recalled Raza Murad. "At that time, the BJP was in power but Shatrughan Sinha was the sole voice who had raised the issue and commented, 'The heavens would not have fallen if George Fernandes had been re-inducted after he had been cleared.' He was immediately asked by a journalist how he could make such a statement about their own allies and what would be Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee's reaction to this? Shatrusaab had replied, 'Atalji is a very great man, I respect him immensely. But Atalji is not God.' It needed extraordinary guts to make such a statement about your own party boss. Shatrusaab always had the tendency to swim against the tide and get away with it."

In his hot-blooded young days, romantic enounters and boyish brawls figured in equal measure in SS' life.

Raza remembered, "Decades ago, Prem Chopra and Sanjay Khan had got into an argument at a party and Shatrusaab had tried to pacify Sanjay. Reena Roy was also at the party. Sanjay Khan was uncontrollable and soon a heated argument ensued between Sanjay and Shatrusaab. It was an ugly fracas and when Shatrusaab left the party, he met filmmaker Prakash Mehra who had an old score to settle with Sanjay Khan. Prakash Mehra was also a hot-headed man in his heyday. Both of them went to actor Ranjeet's bungalow in Juhu and started challenging Sanjay Khan next door. They began firing in the air with their licensed pistols. Zarine begged Sanjay not to go out and retaliate and there was a big controversy. A complaint was filed with the police and finally a senior like Dilip Kumar had to intervene to settle the matter between Sanjay and

Shatrusaab."

SS made a big mistake once when he modelled for an alcoholic drink through surrogate advertising. "But like a gentleman, he apologised and admitted that he had made a mistake," commented Raza.

"Another quality I like about him," said Raza, "is that I have never heard a single inauspicious word slip from his lips. There is a lot of positivity in him."

Raza's musings wound up on a musical note as he remarked, "I've got news for you. Although Shatrusaab was not known as a dancing-singing star, many of his songs became chartbusters." Raza was ready with a list:

The haunting "Kayin Sadiyon Se Kayin Janamon Se, Tere Pyar Ko Tarse Mera Man" in *Milaap*, sung soulfully by Mukesh;

"Dil Ka Soona Saaz Tarana Dhoondega" by Mohammed Rafi from *Ek* Nari Do Roop;

"Shor Mach Gaya Shor Dekho Aaya Maakhan Chor" from *Badla;*

"Zindagi Imtihan Leti Hai" from *Naseeb* which was picturised on Amitabh Bachchan, Reena Roy and Shatrughan Sinha;

"Sainath Tere Hazaaron Haath" from *Shirdi Ke Sai Baba* where he played a fakir;

"Bane Chahe Dushman Zamana Hamara Salamat Rahe Dostana Hamara" with Amitabh Bachchan in *Dostana;*

"Dhoom Mache Dhoom Aaj Ki Raina" in *Kaala Patthar*. (Strangely there was no song for Amitabh Bachchan in the film);

"Samjhautha Gamon Se Kar Lo" in *Samjhautha* where he voiced the words "*Achche bachche?*" (Good children) which were interspersed between the *antara*s (stanzas);

"Pukaro, Mujhe Phir Pukaro" from *Buniyaad;*

"Sharbati Teri Aankhon Ki" in *Blackmail;*

"Kaise Jeete Hain Bhala Humse Seekho Ye Ada" in *Dost;*

"Aaj Mere Yaar Ki Shaadi Hai" from *Aadmi Sadak Ka*, a Shatrughan Sinha number that has lived on for over three decades and is played without fail by every wedding band.

The admiration for SS' accomplishments was unanimous in the film fraternity.

But from his colleagues' observations, SS also emerged as an endearing, though exasperating family member, at times prone to contradictions.

Once, in a swanky hotel suite where Shashi Tharoor (accompanied by Sunanda Pushkar, a couple of weeks before she died) was also present, one winced when SS, in mid-conversation and without looking down, nonchalantly stuck his foot out for Man Friday Nathu to remove his footwear and put on a fresh pair. The habit which combined feudal Bihar with film star entitlement may have made an incongruous fit in that upper crust ambience. But that was SS, take him or leave him.

His staff chose the former. One saw the same set of domestic and office staff hover around SS for decades, which spoke volumes on a caring employer few wanted to leave. As Salim Khan stated, that was the mark of a good man.

Similarly, despite the recurring charge of indiscipline levied against him, he understood and respected deadlines. He ran a Q & A for the much-respected film publication *Filmfare* for years, combining humour with current affairs in his replies to readers' questions. "He's a stickler for deadlines," said Jitesh Pillai, Editor of *Filmfare*. "In all these years, we've never had to go without his column because he missed a deadline."

The contradictions persisted in many avatars.

To many it would seem that SS' statements betrayed an impetuous, brash man who was a bit of a loose cannon. Yet there were evenings when someone around him would have a drink too many, and lose his verbal inhibitions, while SS would watch him silently, even defusing any tension with maturity if the conversation tended to raise hackles.

The entire portrait of SS got its finishing touches from superstar Amitabh Bachchan, a friend who knew him from 1969. Amitabh looked at SS with the gracious wisdom of an older sibling who accepted the whole package with affection and amusement.

"Shatru and I and all his other close friends would spend a great amount of time at his apartment in Bandstand – a luxury I did not have," said the renowned baritone of Hindi cinema, as he talked of early times spent together in Bombay. "I was hopping around from benches on Marine Drive to close friends' homes, with no permanency," he added, exhibiting characteristic humility, "while Shatru was an established star at the time – he was working in important and large-profile banners with elite stars as colleagues.

“His apartment was always filled with his friends. He has always had many people around him, and his has been a very welcoming grace to all, a trait one observes, he has maintained to this day.”

As two outsiders who looked for acceptance from Bombay, Amitabh and SS shared more than just a struggle. The seventy-three-year-old legendary actor recalled how the companionship helped withstand the initial blows.

“He (SS) was an established star at that early stage, notwithstanding his very commendable credentials from the FTII,” Amitabh said. “We never went out job-hunting together. He did not need to; I did. On several occasions, he would ask us to come along with him where he was shooting and would generously introduce me to directors and other star colleagues with great compliment. Struggles were discussed with humorous interjections. We all had that odd story to narrate to each other. But being in collective company was an asset. Sharing your issues together would, at times, reduce the pain of struggle or disappointment. Shatru always had a streak of humour, no matter what the circumstance, attached to his experiences good or bad. And he still does.”

Amitabh’s reminiscences explained why SS had some of his well-known irksome traits. The truth was, he always had them and stardom had little to do with it. Amitabh’s narration of amusing times revealed that SS’ tendency towards *nawabi* (royal) tantrums was inborn and not necessarily cultivated.

“At times we went out together to catch a film,” Amitabh recalled. “But that was an event! He (SS) even went late for the films we went to see. He had a second-hand car, another luxury at a time when most of us were at the mercy of local trains, and all of us used to pile in for this rambling ride into town, now more popularly known as South Bombay or SoBo. At halfway point, the car would invariably break down, and we would all get down to push it into some motion. All? I may be wrong here because I think Shatru always remained in the car. His demeanour was always regal, as you may have observed! But it was all in good spirit and a lot of fun. Travelling with him at airports in later years, was another tense experience altogether. He was late for his flights too. Even after the gates were about to shut and airline staff would urge him to hurry, despite being at the airport, his response would always be ‘*Aate hain, aate hain* (We’re coming, we’re coming)’ and take his own time to reach the aircraft!”

There was a lot of common ground that they shared at that point of time.

“The fact that we shared Pawanji as our manager, and later, when I was courting Jaya, both him (SS) and her being exemplary graduates from the FTII,

were commonalities in our association. Indeed it was Shatru who had spoken very highly of Jaya's talents when she and I started work together in our first film, *Guddi*."

Amitabh had enough fondness for his friend to recall even SS' attempts to upstage a co-star with a smile.

"We worked in several films together, some unreleased to date as well. That he is a most accomplished artiste is a given, and, therefore, working on set was always a delight. When you have brilliant co-stars beside you, your own competence improves, or at least attempts are made to improve them. Shatru demanded attention, and his acts of performance always dictated that. As a most popular villain his entries were accompanied by huge applause and cheers – a rare phenomenon. He always had the ability to draw attention to himself in a scene, even when it was not required to. He could be placed somewhere in the background in a sequence, and you could rest assured that he would still be able to get the audience to notice him, rather than the lead players who were in front of the camera lens.

"In the film *Bombay To Goa* where both of us worked together, during a scene by the swimming pool where Aruna Iraniji and I were doing our stuff, he (SS) was asked to stand somewhere at the back because he was not an integral part of the moment. The action started and we were in the middle of our lines when suddenly a smoke ring came sailing past my nose! Yes... that was Shatru smoking his cigarette, blowing smoke rings and drawing attention to himself, standing way back in the frame! We still laugh over that moment!"

Notwithstanding the *Kaala Patthar* incident described by Salim Khan, Amitabh declared, "There has never been a distance between us (SS and AB), at least never from my side.

"To me, Shatru has been a wonderful example of achievement. He started off as a villain, succeeded immensely, switched to playing the lead, succeeded there as well and then took on politics and succeeded there as well! This is no mean achievement in any individual's life. How many such examples are there in our industry? A Vinod Khanna perhaps, but none other. At least, for the time being."

As is his wont, SS' statements and deeds may have sometimes hurt or irked his friends (like returning the *mithai* that the Bachchans had sent him for Abhishek's marriage to Aishwarya). But Amitabh's sharp take on SS' brash, impulsive streak was pithy, and summed up just why the actor-politician's friendships survived several hiccups.

“So what’s wrong with being brash and impulsive?” Amitabh Bachchan posed a counter question before adding, “That is a character and nature study. Fine. So long as the basics are in place, nothing else matters. And I have always felt that our basics are intact.

“When he has invited me, I have attended, and vice versa. There are times when there was no invite and still there was attendance. When my father was breathing his last, I shall never forget his (SS’) visit to Prateeksha, late at night, to offer not just his concern but also as Minister for Health to give assurance to me that if the Ministry could do anything, then not to hesitate to ask. This I shall value above all else, ever. When he had his heart surgery we went to visit him in hospital. No one called me to come to see him. Basics...they are important. The basics, and culture and upbringing. His children have always shown basic respect whenever they have met Jaya and me. They have traditionally always bent down to touch our feet, a practice that I am most uncomfortable with, whenever we have met – in private or in public.”

Amitabh’s final word on SS was moving: “Let him be who he is. Do not attempt to change him. He shall lose his individuality if he did. Of the 1.25 crore people of India, he stands out as a unique example. He is who he is because of his qualities.”

The distinctiveness was witnessed when clones of the Hindi film actor were born in the most unlikely part of India – in the South of the Vindhyas.

6

Southern Comfort

Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself.
When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.

Jack Welch

An incredulous aspect of Shatrughan Sinha's stardom was that the actor-politician from the staunch Hindi belt found resonance in the most unlikely part of India – in South India where men in white *dhoti*s spoke a different language and where the BJP could never make much headway. It is interesting that some of the biggest stars of South India unabashedly drew inspiration from SS and also forged a personal bond with him.

"He looks like one of us," chuckled Chiranjeevi, the actor-politician from Andhra Pradesh.

Indeed, at a function organised by Congress politician T Subbarami Reddy in Hyderabad, an array of top South Indian film stars standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Shatrughan looked like an assembly line – tall, tanned, confident men, all of them sporting a moustache.

One of them was Chiranjeevi, a much-revered name in Telugu cinema with a fan following that could at times go out of control (at one of his jam-packed political rallies, thirty-two people died in a stampede). Sitting in his Jubilee Hills mansion that looked down on the city of Hyderabad, he accepted without hesitation, “I became an actor because of Shatrughan Sinha.”

The inspiration began as admiration from a fan. “Whenever a new Shatrughan Sinha film was released, irrespective of the character he played in it, I’d watch it with complete admiration,” said Chiranjeevi. “I went to see a Hindi film only for Shatrughan; he was the main attraction for me. For example, I didn’t know whether Randhir Kapoor or anybody else was the hero of *Raampur Ka Lakshman.* It was enough for me that Shatruji was in it.

“When a film of his called *Sabak* was released, my friends told me it was a disaster. I was such a big fan that I still went to see it. And if I came back feeling let down, it was not because of the subject or because he played a sober role in it. I was disappointed because Shatruji had changed his hairstyle in the film!

“I used to like the way his hair would fall over his forehead. But in *Sabak* he had backcombed his hair and that completely changed the image which I admired. Fortunately, he later switched back to his normal style.

“In 1975, I was still a college student doing my second year BCom when *Sholay* was released. Much after it was released, I came to know that Shatruji was to have done Dharmendra’s or some other role in it. Those days news did not spread as fast as it does today. When I heard it, I was oh so disappointed. *Arre*, how I wish he had been in *Sholay*!

“People would tell me that my eyes and facial features looked like his. I think it was that constant comment which triggered the idea that I too could become an actor. Till then we had very handsome heroes like NT Rama Rao, A Nageshwara Rao, Shobhan Babu, Krishna, Krishnam Raju, in Telugu cinema. I could not imagine myself amongst them; I looked so common, so normal. So when people told me that I looked like Shatruji, it became the trigger for me to become an actor.

“I used to enjoy mouthing some of Shatruji’s dialogues like, ‘*Bandook haath mein lekar geedadh bhi sher ban jayega, Heera* (Heera, with a gun in hand, even a jackal can turn into a lion)!’ The way he delivered his dialogues was unmatched. I was never a mimic but I used to get a kick imitating his voice. It was mesmerising to watch his command over the language, his confidence, the dominating body language, the don’t-care attitude, the expression in his eyes, the

power. I used to love his mass appeal, his mannerisms. I think he was a big influence on many of us, not only on me. You could easily see how much Shatrughan Sinha influenced Rajinikanth – the throwing of the cigarette, the sharp turning of his head, the expression on the face. Rajini copied his gimmicks and mannerisms and made them his own," laughed Chiranjeevi. "Now even if Shatruji does it, people will say he's imitating Rajinikanth!"

For Chiranjeevi, the admiration for the man on the screen spilled over and became personal when he finally met SS in flesh and blood. "It was such a joy," he continued the exclamations. "So young at heart, so full of jubilation, you enjoyed his presence. Though we looked at him as a man we admired so much, he met us like a chilled-out friend."

In his own career as an actor, Chiranjeevi didn't do a take-off on SS; in fact, he didn't even do any of his remakes. "I only took inspiration from him to come into films, not to copy him as an actor," remarked the Telugu film star. But he acknowledged, "My body language and my dialogue delivery were inspired by Shatruji. I am also known for my mannerism-dialogues. Like his famous *'Khamosh'*, I too am known for certain stylised dialogues."

In fact, SS continued to be an inspiration long after Chiranjeevi became a name to reckon with in Telugu cinema. The actor from Andhra Pradesh disclosed disarmingly, "Sometimes, when I wasn't sure how to portray a character in a particular situation, I would ask myself, 'How would Shatruji have interpreted it?' My body language and chemistry would automatically change; the confidence level would increase. It definitely worked for me."

The influence didn't stop with cinema. Chiranjeevi also made a shift from films to politics like the senior actor from Patna, though he followed a different ideology. (After floating his own party, Chiranjeevi later aligned with the Congress.)

"I didn't discuss my decision to enter politics with him but after I made up my mind, he came to my house and told me, 'Chiranjeevi, I admire you for entering politics. It's a daring step; it's not easy to stay on in politics. But you've had enough of a life in films. Now it's time to go forward. It's a natural progression.' So he came over and inspired me. He also told me, 'This is what I was expecting from Rajinikanth but he's not daring enough.' He said, 'This is what I wish my friend Rajini would also do.'"

Chiranjeevi's entry into politics was no surprise because traditionally, film stars in the South have used that route to extend their public lives. However,

while many of them glittered, none of them could go beyond regional boundaries and play a part at the Centre. That honour was bagged first by the Bihari actor.

“It was a great achievement,” remarked Chiranjeevi, “because all the stars who were MPs were mainly ornamental. Shatrughan Sinha broke that image by becoming the first film star to be given a Cabinet post, and put in a position where he could genuinely serve the public. He made our fraternity really proud.”

A success story similar to Chiranjeevi’s had already happened in the bordering State of Tamil Nadu with the phenomenal rise of a bus conductor who became superstar Rajinikanth.

Thunderous hits like *Shivaji* and *Robot* had turned him into one of the biggest brands of India. But sitting in his sprawling Poes Garden bungalow in Chennai, Rajinikanth was humility personified when he unstintingly called himself, “A great Shatrughan Sinha fan right from films like *Do Yaar* in the seventies.”

Much may have changed in his own fame and fortune in the intervening four decades but the star from Chennai ungrudgingly credited his growth in commercial cinema to SS.

“When I started out as an actor, I concentrated on being a stylised villain,” Rajinikanth elaborated. “The only stylised villain those days was Shatrughan Sinha and I drew inspiration from his performances. I learnt from him how to flick a cigarette with swagger and panache.

“When I started watching Shatrughan Sinha’s films, *Do Yaar*, *Raampur Ka Lakshman*, I was fascinated with his mannerisms, the way he’d hit someone and nonchalantly look at his watch. Incidentally, a little later, I did that same character in *Mangudi Minor* (*Raampur Ka Lakshman* in Tamil) and from that day onwards Shatrughan Sinha was my inspiration. When I played the villain, the mannerisms were strongly influenced by him. I completely followed his style of acting those days. There used to be write-ups in the seventies calling me the Shatrughan Sinha of the South.”

It wasn’t long before SS began to hear about the fast-rising star in Tamil Nadu who was gaining popularity by following his act, quite literally. When they eventually met, Rajinikanth was like a thrilled fan.

“I’d already done the remake of *Raampur Ka Lakshman,*” recalled Rajini. “We met at an airport where I went up and met him. Oh yes, he had heard by then that somebody in Chennai was following his style of acting.”

When Rajinikanth began to do a few Hindi films, he started meeting SS in

Bombay. They even did a couple of films together. One was aptly titled *Asli Naqli;* it brought the two stars from the same mould together in the same frame. The other, also well-named, was *Takrao* where they clashed on celluloid.

Rajinikanth's rise was meteoric. He laughed, "Shatrughan Sinha began to say, 'Now you have become my guru.' We became very good friends; the two families also became close. Poonam used to tie a *rakhi* to me."

Rajinikanth was also delighted to find they had much in common that went beyond the obvious physical attributes of tall, dark and manly. "Framewise, we're both the same, we have a small frame, small eyes, small mouth, mouche," he enumerated.

Both SS and Rajinikanth were so possessive about the hair on the upper lip that each shaved it off only once in his career – Rajinikanth went without his moustache in a film on his guru, Raghavendra Swamy while SS did it for Ram Gopal Varma in *Rakhta Charitra*.

One similarity that was not so obvious to the public outside was that irrespective of their aggressive exterior, SS and Rajinikanth were completely dependent on their respective wives. "I am 100% dependent on Latha," Rajinikanth chortled.

SS was known to never forget his old friends irrespective of their social status. Likewise, when Rajinikanth was a bus conductor called Shivajirao Gaekwad in Bangalore (now Bengaluru), he'd struck up a close friendship with Raj Bahadur, a bus driver who had backed his dreams of becoming an actor. To this day, they remain firm friends.

Like SS did in 1975, Rajinikanth too, came out and took a political stand in 1995 against Jayalalithaa's Government. So, although he did not venture deeply into it, he did have a toehold and say in Tamil Nadu politics. "I did that only once," pointed out Rajinikanth. "The political situation in 1995 was very different, so I had come out and made a statement. It was a hot situation, election time, so everybody grabbed the statement and made it big. I am not interested in politics. Right now, today, no. But I don't know about tomorrow." He continued to remain verbally non-committal except for endorsing Narendra Modi as the prime ministerial candidate in 2014.

Rajinikanth left the door open to walk in when he was ready. Meanwhile, he watched SS' moves closely as he commented, "Before taking a decision, before he joined the BJP, he was in a dilemma over whether to join the Congress or the BJP. Finally he chose the BJP. He thought it over several times and debated

whether to enter politics or not. Shatrughan Sinha is a very shrewd man; he thinks a lot. People don't know the other side of Shatruji. Don't get taken in by that loud talk. That's only 25%. 75% is deep. He calculates, he thinks."

One would think that given his legendary hold over fans and followers in India and abroad, Rajinikanth would experience moments when he felt that he had overtaken his guru. But the Southern star summed up their equation with the emphatic statement, "Have you read Shatruji's Q&A in *Filmfare*? He has been writing it for more than ten years. Can anybody else do it like him? What one-liners he comes up with; what a sharp brain he has. There has been and there will be only one Shatrughan Sinha."

In the North-Western State adjoining Tamil Nadu, a story similar to Rajinikanth's had unfolded in Karnataka too.

Colourful superstar Ambareesh who once famously swayed into the Taj in Bengaluru with a bottle of Black Label on his head, defying anybody to stop him from bringing his own favourite brand into the hotel, had succeeded in politics too. He was elected to the Lok Sabha, had served as Minister of State in the I&B Ministry in Delhi and was Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's Minister for Housing in the Karnataka Government.

After winding up a meeting with a bunch of builders in his Bengaluru bungalow, Ambareesh sat back and proudly underlined, "Whatever I am in life today is because of Shatrughan Sinha. My whole career has moved on the same lines as his. More than being his fan, ours is an Eklavya and Dronacharya story. He is my guru."

The man from Bihar connected with a college boy in Karnataka when Ambareesh watched *Khilona* and *Mere Apne.*

"People used to call me Shatrughan Sinha; I bore a slight resemblance to him," stated Ambareesh. In the early seventies, when filmmaker Puttana Kanagal was looking for new faces for his film *Naagarahavu*, Ambareesh replicated SS' stylised mannerisms for a make-up test (audition).

"I threw the cigarette and walked with the same stylish swagger as Shatruji," he recalled. Puttana Kanagal was impressed, *Nagarahavu* was a blockbuster, and another SS clone was born in another part of India. In fact, SS, Ambareesh, Rajinikanth and Chiranjeevi became close, like a family of immensely successful look-alikes.

Political affiliations didn't come in the way.

“I am a Congressman, he is a BJP man,” pointed out Ambareesh. “But when he steps into Bengaluru, he doesn’t think of me as a Congressman. He comes to my house as an older brother. Even when he was a Cabinet Minister in the BJP Government, his first visit would be to my house.”

Extremely popular all over Karnataka and just as outspoken as SS, Ambareesh the actor-politician reiterated, “All that’s happened in my life is because of Shatruji. If I didn’t look like him, nobody would have recognised me. He was the first villain to get an unprecedented ovation. I also went through the same trajectory. I was also a villain, then a supporting hero and finally the leading man.”

Like SS, Ambareesh also married a very attractive actress. But, unlike Poonam Sinha who gave up her career for her man and marriage, Ambareesh’s wife Sumalatha continued to work in films.

Another similarity was Ambareesh’s stubborn independent streak. Despite SS’ best efforts, Ambareesh rasped with a smoker’s cough but wouldn’t give up his cigarettes.

“Shatruji is after the whole world to give up smoking,” he shrugged nonchalantly. But this Eklavya marched to his own beat – much like his Dronacharya did all his life.

Back in Hyderabad, there was another popular Telugu star who took the villain-to-hero trek like SS and became a part of the Ambareesh-Rajinikanth-Chiranjeevi-SS clique.

“I met Shatruji about thirty-two years ago and all of us became very good friends,” revealed flamboyant, straight-talking actor Mohan Babu.

“I got very influenced by Shatruji in my performances, especially in my dialogue delivery. I liked the way he would bring modulation and expression to his dialogues, the way his voice would go up and down. I liked that and I followed it in my performances.

“I was the villain in a film titled *Dongala Dopidi* and I followed Shatruji’s style of dialogue delivery in it. There were lots of films where I followed him. *Sivaranjini* ran for fifty weeks. I did different types of modulations in it. In all these performances, I was influenced by Shatruji.”

Like most leading film stars of the South, Mohan Babu too had his stint in public life. He pointed out, “Like Shatruji, I started as a villain and then became a hero. Like him I also went to the Rajya Sabha. But,” he said, “I did not remain

in active politics, I hate politics."

With dramatic oratory skills, Mohan Babu tended to thunder all his observations. He filibustered, "I would sum up Shatruji with these words: good human being. Not like other Hindi artistes from North India."

Padma Shri Mohan Babu wasn't done yet. "I don't know why the government has never recognised Shatrughan Sinha. He should get the Padma Bhushan or Padma Vibhushan. Was he denied the honour all these years because he was with the BJP?" he asked aloud.

That's what politics is all about and SS had a four-decade-long association with it.

7

The Rough And Tumble Of A Life In Politics

Politics is more difficult than Physics.

Albert Einstein

Suddenly, he became relevant again.

A few days after he cast his vote in the Bihar Assembly elections of 2015, when SS boarded a Jet Airways flight to London on November 2, 2015, for a personal meeting, it was as if many forces had combined to send him to Coventry.

His party had pointedly sidelined him.

Despite a thumping victory in the Lok Sabha elections (2014) from Patna Sahib in Bihar, he couldn't be jubilant for long. As SS witnessed the gradual scaling down of his importance within his party, one saw him flash the *navras* (the gamut of nine main emotions) at various points.

There was buoyancy over a victory hard won. But there was bafflement as he

watched a parade of Johnnies-come-lately take their oath in the Cabinet while seniors were kept firmly behind the cordon.

“Not only Johnnies-come-lately but also some who had lost the Lok Sabha elections, perhaps humiliatingly, were rewarded with not one but two and three ministerial posts, marginalising those who’d won with a record margin,” he said, without mincing words.

By the time the Bihar Assembly elections rolled along, the disregard for SS had snowballed. The new frontline of the party blocked him to the point where his open dissidence was ignored like he just didn’t matter. There was hurt and humiliation.

“Just as you find messages like ‘*Prabhu, ab tera hi sahara* (Lord, now you’re my only support)’ behind lorries and trucks, I was left with no other *sahara* but to use Twitter as my platform,” he said. He used Twitter to air his comments, “unabashedly and effectively”.

His tweets, which he considered more advisory than accusatory, cautioned his party not to underestimate Nitish Kumar. He openly said, “Don’t count on the anti-incumbency factor because there is no anti-incumbency evident anywhere in Bihar”, and tweeted on the need to name a chief ministerial candidate from the party.

“I also cautioned my party that *mehengayi*, rising prices, will be an issue. We’d already shed tears and lost an election over onion prices in the past. So I cautioned them to control the prices of essentials like *dal* and vegetables or pay the price. And we did end up paying the price for it,” he added.

The ethics in his politics depended on which side of the fence one stood.

From his perspective, these were points he wanted to raise within his party to energise and strategise their campaign. He wanted robust positivity, more credible, acceptable faces on hoardings, more democracy in the campaign, and less personal rhetoric against the Opposition. But his suggestions were met with stony silence, making him seem a disgruntled voice of dissidence that did not deserve either a hearing, or a platform as a star campaigner in his home State.

There was disbelief and disappointment in SS as Hema Malini and Ajay Devgn were brought in to campaign for the BJP in Bihar. It was like a personal affront to SS’ celebrity worth. Both actors were people he respected – Devgn was his daughter’s co-star; Hema was a family friend. But what was their grassroots connect with Bihar?

“The party was hijacked by some people in Bihar who conveniently played deaf-mute. They were not ready to listen to (me) or to speak (to me). That’s how they created an impression which the Opposition seized as an opportunity and the ‘Bihari versus Bahari’ (Outsider) slogan was coined. People from Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, were brought in hordes and packed into Bihar, *bhar diya gaya*, as if the party hadn’t learnt a lesson from the Delhi debacle at the hands of Kejriwal. Certain local forces also joined hands with the *bahari*s to settle scores with me once and for all. But thanks to my strategy, my tweets and the media, it boomeranged on them. Like our friend Lalu Prasad bounced back from the Opposition, which was an eye-opener to the country, I also bounced back because I was on the side of truth. I was doing things honestly and with transparency.”

There were moments when SS exhibited the human trait of heartache, when he despaired that political life was so complicated that had he known how tough it would be to play the game, perhaps he’d never have enrolled himself for the part.

Unlike party seniors LK Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi who too had been asked to sit it out and play mute onlookers, SS was not one to exercise RSS-style discipline or restraint. He was at his combative best. The more he was overlooked, the more frequently he supped with the Opposition, and the more defiant his tweets turned. He was anything but *khamosh*.

The party had chosen a tactic that hurt more than retaliation – they ignored him. “Why should we make a martyr of him by expelling him?” a spokesperson said, off-the-record.

It was as if neither SS nor his statements made a whit’s difference to any of them or to the party. “Whether we win Bihar or lose it, it won’t have anything to do with SS. He won’t make a difference either way,” they believed.

“They made themselves so helpless,” SS shot back. “One heard that they’d be taking action against Shatrughan Sinha after the Bihar elections. I said, I didn’t know my people were so helpless that they had to wait for an election to take action. That too against a man who had won with a vote share percentage of more than 55% which even our Prime Minister and Kejriwal didn’t reach; a man who could also stand as an independent and had the support of many, right from Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad to Rahul Gandhi. That’s why I had made the statement, ‘Those who want to take action against me must remember Newton’s third law: Every action has an equal and opposite reaction’.

“Amit Shah, our Party President, had predicted with great confidence that we would win with ⅔rd majority. Perhaps it had become a habit with him because he had said the same thing in Delhi also. But ultimately we got only two or three seats there instead of ⅔rd,” SS smirked. “Right from State President Mangal Panday to Sushil Kumar Modi to Rajiv Pratap Rudy to Shahnawaz Hussain, anybody and everybody, repeated his words like parrots with full zeal, enthusiasm and over confidence.”

In the media too, no anchor, pollster or journalist had counted on the possibility that the Shatrughan Sinha/Bihari Babu effect (i.e. the voice of dissidence) could also be a contributory factor in the Bihar elections.

When SS took off from London on his return journey to India on November 7, he was still the man who didn’t count.

But by the time he landed at T3 on November 8 at 10.30 am, there was a sea-change in perspectives. It was as if en route, up in the air, the man had changed.

Within minutes, the routing of the BJP at the Bihar hustings turned SS from inconsequential to substantial, from redundant to important, from pathetic to prophetic. From the moment he landed, every TV channel sought his wisdom on Bihar.

Anil Agarwal, the Founder-Chairman of Vedanta Group of Industries was chuffed at something SS said. “He gave a statement that only two Biharis have made it outstandingly big outside the State – Shatrughan Sinha and Anil Agarwal,” chuckled the self-made billionaire.

Agarwal knew SS right from his Patna days, before stardom took him to another State. Without getting drawn into making a political comment, Agarwal remarked, “What I can say with confidence about Shatrughan is that he is a man who needs to be convinced. He cannot be bought with any amount of money, he can only be convinced.”

SS was convinced that there was nothing wrong in saying it like he saw it. He foresaw what few did – the victory of the Grand Alliance with Lalu making a comeback and Nitish back in the Chief Minister’s chair.

The results of the Bihar elections suddenly turned the spotlight on the SS effect. When more seniors like LK Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi, Arun Shourie and Shanta Kumar turned the ‘miffidence’ into a chorus, SS the politician seemed to have scored a point.

But the twists and turns were characteristic of his political life. This wasn’t the

first time he had courted expulsion – the many flashpoints with his party surfaced in an incisive retelling of his career as a politician.

Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Sinha and his sons were well-read and politically aware, as most Biharis are wont to be. In fact, renowned people's leader Jayaprakash Narayan got the moniker 'Lok Nayak' from the Sinha household. At a procession during the JP Movement in 1974, when Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav were still political non-entities, it was Dr Bharat Sinha who had spontaneously shouted, "*Lok Nayak zindabad, zindabad* (Long live the Lok Nayak)."

The name stuck. Decades later, when Nitish Kumar rose impressively in his State, he had said to a Patna daily, "Laluji claims he called JP 'Lok Nayak' but I was there and I know that the name was given to him by Shatrughan Sinha's brother."

However, SS was the only member of his family who went from being politically-aware to becoming a full-bodied politician, catapulting himself into the arena completely on his own steam with no known political surname or family to ease his entry. After gaining stardom in an industry where he was the dark horse with no filmland connections, he did the improbable again in the fickle world of politics.

He soon became more politician than film star. His day would begin with devouring every newspaper that went to his room. Any time you wandered into his drawing room or hotel suite, a prominent news channel in Hindi or English would be his only watch. He was one of the few Mumbaikars who became more at home in the capital of power than in the city of glamour.

He also always emitted contradictory signals. He was so comfortable across the border that Late General Zia ul Haq's daughter Zain tied a *rakhi* to him. Different regimes in Pakistan extended him the hospitality that a State guest would merit. He was an actor who enjoyed social evenings with food, drink and company. Therefore, many of his friends from the Muslim community tended to sum up his loyalty to the BJP as the right man in the wrong party.

But his loyalty to his party itself was under scrutiny. He was a BJP member who lavished praise on the party's *bête noire* Arvind Kejriwal. He was a sitting MP when he went public against his own party President Nitin Gadkari's statements. His party announced Kiran Bedi as their chief ministerial candidate for Delhi – SS went on record that Dr Harsh Vardhan would have been the "better and perhaps the only choice" for that post. His Prime Minister Narendra

Modi took on Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar at a public rally. Within hours, SS called on Nitish Kumar, posed for pictures and captioned it ‘A courtesy call’.

“I have friends everywhere,” he maintained. “Devi Lal was extremely fond of me and the feeling was mutual. I had great respect for Jyoti Basu and considered him a very tall statesman. I am very fond of Mamata Banerjee too. But does that mean I’ll join their party or they’ll join me? No way. I’ve always said, BJP is my first and perhaps, my last party. Once a friend, always a friend. *Ladte jhagadte hain* (we fight) but we remain family,” he asserted, even after the tempestuous Bihar elections of 2015.

He entered politics in 1991 by saying he wouldn’t use the backdoor to enter Parliament but would contest a Lok Sabha seat. But after losing to fellow film star Rajesh Khanna in a by-election, he opened the Rajya Sabha door and walked in. Once in, he wanted to stay put for a third continuous term when his party directed him to stand for elections and enter the Lok Sabha. He did it grudgingly. But after a taste of electoral victory, he wouldn’t dream of going back to the Upper House. Did the BJP look at him as another drama-driven film star who had to be appeased to avoid negative headlines? Or, did SS have it in him to play a more serious role at the national level?

A careful look at his four stints in Parliament (two terms in the Rajya Sabha and two in the Lok Sabha), invaluable inputs by political stalwarts around him and forthright admissions by the man himself, were the best ways to profile SS the politician.

2014, Patna. He was standing for a Lok Sabha seat for the second time from Patna Sahib. Between 2009 and 2014, much had changed. Shekhar Suman, the Congress candidate who had opposed SS in 2009, was back to being his ally.

Miffed brother Lakhan Sinha who had reportedly given his blessings to SS’ rival five years ago, had not only come around by 2014 but was also spotted at rallies huge and humble that his star-brother addressed all over the Patna Sahib constituency.

In 2009, Sonakshi, who was still to make a mark as an actor, had gone to Patna to support her father. In 2014, she was a celebrity in her own right, requiring tight, vigilant security around her. This time around, Sonakshi stayed out of his electoral path.

“Or, she was kept out of it,” SS smartly differentiated between the two. He outlined the new approach to his campaign in 2014.

“In 2014, it was once again a party with a difference. The entire campaign centred around the projection of a dashing, dynamic Narendra Modi as the potential Prime Minister. The aggressive marketing with the Vidyarthi Parishad, the Bharitya Yuva Sena, the party workers, everybody pitching in, plus the anti-incumbency factor which went against the previous government, and with Modi’s own oratory skills and dramatic style, the chorus of ‘Modi, Modi’ was heard everywhere. Though we did lose some seats, like 8 seats in Bihar including Shahnawaz Hussain’s where Modi had campaigned, the overall general feeling was that even a lamp post would win in this tremendous wave.

“With complete confidence, we decided as a family that but for my wife and sons, we’ll invite nobody, nobody at all, to campaign for me. Not even the closest and best of friends, be that Advaniji, Rajnathji, Sushmaji or Yashwantji. Mr Narendra Modi spoke to me on my father’s anniversary. I still remember the date, it was April 10, 2014, when he spoke to me and asked me how we were faring in our preparation for the elections, and if I wanted anything from him. He was coming to Bihar the next day to campaign for another candidate. I said to Modiji, ‘We’re doing well, we’re good, no worries. I’ll manage fine on my own.’ I assured him that we’d do him proud.

“So we didn’t invite anyone, including our daughter Sonakshi who had become a big star, to come and campaign for me. For me, the biggest stars were the people of Bihar. I said, ‘I don’t depend on anyone else but the people of Bihar.’”

In 2014, Poonam moved bag and baggage to Patna, and hit the door-to-door trail. She did all that her husband couldn’t. She went into the interiors and met families on a one-on-one human level, Luv or Kussh always by her side.

The other twin went with camera in hand to record his father’s thunderous – though repetitive – speeches. When a helicopter landed with BJP’s Sushil Modi and alliance partner Ram Vilas Paswan in the far-flung village of Fatuha which was part of the Patna Sahib constituency, and SS stepped forward to receive them, the crowds gave them a rousing reception.

The moment he got off the dais, SS was transferred to an open truck for a long, road rally. He stood atop for the next five hours and spoke to voters who had lined the roads to catch a glimpse of their candidate and to garland him. The rush of adrenaline was high.

At the end of a successful day, SS rested in his suite at the Maurya in Patna with Man Friday Nathu massaging his tired neck, arms and feet. The electoral

battle he faced with the Congress, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and other parties was one story. But even before he stood as the BJP candidate, he had encountered another battle within his own party over the Patna Sahib seat.

That was what remained unchanged between 2009 and 2014: during both elections, within the party ranks there was dissent when he was announced the BJP candidate, and both times efforts were made to scuttle his chances.

Although he had won handsomely from the constituency in 2009, the attempt to dislodge SS from Patna Sahib was more marked in 2014. The party was making sweeping changes as the old order had to make way for the new. Former cricketer and sitting MP Navjot Singh was asked to vacate Amritsar to make way for Arun Jaitley. Veteran Murli Manohar Joshi had to give up Varanasi for Narendra Modi, and move to Kanpur to fight the elections. Senior statesman Jaswant Singh staged a rebellion and declared himself an independent candidate. In the midst of this unease, there was a long and uncomfortable wait for the BJP to name Shatrughan Sinha as its candidate from Patna Sahib which he obstinately maintained was his territory.

The delay gave rise to rumblings that a nettled SS was on the verge of switching loyalties. He was one of the last candidates that the BJP finally announced – his occasional points of discomfiture with the party were an inerasable part of his political career.

Maintaining his tell-all tenor, he talked of backroom moves and the strategy-driven game of politics. With it, he also traced his political career.

“From being called a party with a difference, we began to be called a party with differences,” he stated, as he dissected the BJP.

But he stuck with it all the same.

“A member’s equation with the party is like the relationship between a husband and wife,” he explained. “So, while on many occasions the party must have tolerated me, at several other times I must have also had to put up with their politics. But in true Indian tradition where we have been brought up to respect the institution of marriage and to try our utmost to go through ups and downs together, the party and I have stuck by each other through thick and thin.”

A divorce was, therefore, averted every time there was a squabble. But it also meant that while there were occasions to rejoice, there were moments of regret too.

In fact, his first baby step was one such moment.

“If there is one regret that I have in politics, it is that I was made to fight Rajesh Khanna from Delhi in 1991,” he stated, tracking his entry into the BJP and life thereafter. “For this, in his lifetime I had apologised to Rajesh Khanna both directly and indirectly. Under no circumstances should I have started my active political career with a by-election. But I couldn’t say ‘No’ to Advaniji who was my guide, guru and ultimate leader.”

LK Advani who had stood for, and won the 1991 elections from Gandhinagar and Delhi, had opted for his seat in Gujarat. In the by-election that followed for the Delhi seat, political novice Shatrughan Sinha was brought in by the BJP to counter Congress-I’s film star candidate Rajesh Khanna.

“I was unaware that Advaniji had won that seat in Delhi by a very slim margin,” SS ruminated. “Perhaps he had even almost lost that election because he was fighting from two constituencies and it was perceived as a weakness, as a sign that he wasn’t sure of winning and so he had a back-up.

“On this subject,” he digressed to underscore a political point, “I would credit Arvind Kejriwal with showing rare courage in fighting only one seat and that too against a heavyweight like Sheila Dikshit (in the Delhi Assembly elections, December, 2013). People were predicting a maximum of four seats for AAP at that time while I had maintained that they would get over 25. They did win 28 in 2013. In 2015 I had again predicted that AAP would bag more than 63 seats and they got 67 when they repeated their victory. It showed Kejriwal’s tremendous confidence and self-belief.”

He went back to 1991 and his first step in the electoral fray which he labelled a misstep. “I lost the election because I had to lose it,” he curtly analysed. “Rajesh Khanna was still a craze and Advaniji had barely won that seat. In fact, the rumour was that it was such a slim margin, a re-count had been called for. But a tipsy Rajesh Khanna had waved away the re-count and Advaniji had scraped through. At least that’s what was being whispered at that time. By dismissing a re-count, Rajesh Khanna had been left literally high and dry,” he wryly added.

“The Election Commission was also not so strong back then and it had become a prestige issue for the Congress. Narasimha Rao had told his people, ‘Don’t give me a heart attack when I come back.’ They had to win this seat by hook or by crook. That’s why I say, I had to lose it. If I had won, *ek vaakya banta* (it would’ve been just one sentence), *haara toh adhyay ban gaya*, when I lost it became an entire chapter. *Haara toh* it became national headlines.

Kumkum Chaddha, the famous journalist almost broke down when I said this to her and she said, ‘I can’t write anymore after this.’ Her reaction was the biggest and most emotional compliment I could have received after that by-election.

“It was a learning experience and my biggest political regret.

“When I lost that election, it was one of my rare moments of dejection,” disclosed the man who at all other times looked at the sunny side of life, whatever the weather. “It was the one time I really cried. I also felt very let down because Advaniji had not come even for one day to campaign for me. I understand that important leaders are generally not available for by-election campaigns but considering I was there for him, I do think he should have made an exception and shown his support for me.”

He insisted that he had joined the party and fought the by-election, “Only because of the persuasion of Kalyan Singh, Shanta Kumar, Madanlal Khurana and other party leaders. I had initially resisted all their overtures but I was finally taken before Advaniji, and he had said, ‘It’s a question of our prestige and I don’t want to hear a “No” from you this time.’ Even at that stage, I had said, ‘Let me talk to my high command, my wife,’ and Advaniji had spoken to Promi.”

Standing for that by-election was his baptism by fire into politics as the lessons he learnt were hard and hurtful. But they also prepared him for the long haul.

“It was a terrible time for me,” he remembered. “Politics showed its ugly profile in many ways. After I lost that election, a section of our own party who had not campaigned for me, accused my people of having hardly worked. I was also so sharply sidelined that I would be made to feel distinctly unwelcome at our party office on Ashoka Road. People would stop talking when I entered, or change the topic and make me uncomfortable. One day, a party official who is still with the BJP, came up and told me, ‘Shatruji, please sit outside. We’ll call you when we’re ready to talk to you.’ That went straight to my heart and hurt me so badly, that for years, I never visited the office.

“Meanwhile, my brother Lakhan bhaiya spoke to Advaniji. My whole family had become very friendly with the Advanis. I was put on the National Executive of the party and then sent to the Rajya Sabha for two terms. Advaniji and others explained to me that it would be good for me to be in the House of Elders; I could make a positive contribution from there and that our party needed to have a strong representation there. I never asked for it,” he underlined. He thus entered Parliament through the same ‘backdoor’ that he had scoffed at as a Lok

Sabha candidate in 1991.

A reality in politics he had to accept was that changing one's stance was a constant and sporting a thick skin was a prerequisite.

The ridicule that had followed the 1991 elections when he visited the party office waned, especially after his ability to draw in the crowds was noted. But the resentment endured.

"Glamour names are a dime-a-dozen in the political arena today," SS observed as he claimed his place as the first film star to set foot on the campaign circuit. "I was the original star campaigner of the party and would draw such massive crowds that *India Today* had reported, only two people can pull in such crowds – Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Shatrughan Sinha."

He became the poster boy of the BJP, making a popular troika at the top. "There would be three aircraft available for campaigning – for Atalji, Advaniji and me," he chest-heaved. "Even VP Singh would go by road. It created so much resentment within the party that there were grouses like, he takes along too many people, it's like a picnic for them, he wakes up late, and so on. The Late Pramod Mahajan was one of them," he punched on. "We later became good friends," he conceded.

The stream of complaints against his starry ways compelled him to write, "My first letter to Advaniji. I said in it, 'Yes, I take six people with me when I should actually be taking twelve. The kind of crowds I draw can match that of any top leader in the country – if not more.'" That was the BJP's introduction to SS' frank-speak, a characteristic the party was unused to but had to get accustomed to.

SS explained that his need for company was more a security concern than a celebrity indulgence. "At that time I was not even given the Z-category security that I later got. And by the way, I got 'Z' security thanks to the Congress which was in power and not from my own party," he threw in dryly.

Poonam's observation about her husband's fixation over toilet facilities surfaced during one of his campaigns. Once, SS was taken from rally to rally in the biting cold, with no arrangements to freshen up at any stop. Soon his bladder protested and threatened to burst as he crossed his legs to control himself. He couldn't possibly have gone behind a bush with the milling crowds all around him, and there was no bathroom in sight either. Finally, a desperate SS had staggered into someone's house where he could find only a wash basin. "Because of my height, I could stand there and use the washbasin," SS relived

the experience with a sigh of relief, “and a sense of shame.” It was an instance of the woeful lack of basic arrangements for a campaigner who was a celebrity as well. If his fame drew crowds, it also threw restrictions on his movements, something that the party organisers found difficult to accept.

Therefore, in his missive to LK Advani, SS examined the security arrangements made for him and drew his attention to the unfair practice that prevailed. “I questioned the fact that while I pulled in the crowds, top-level security was being given to other leaders of the party,” he detailed, as he explained that a star campaigner was an unknown phenomenon until then.

“A star campaigner was a novelty and they didn’t know how to treat one. We stars get mobbed, reaching the dais becomes impossible, people stamp on our toes, our lives could be at risk. So I had to put my foot down and say, I will campaign only on my terms.”

He understood where the general resentment stemmed from.

“State leaders of all parties nurse a complex against star campaigners. The truth is, crores of rupees are spent by political parties to bring truckloads of people to a rally, they have to distribute food packets, buy them train tickets, sometimes pay them too, to turn up. None of this has to be done for a star campaigner because the crowds gather on their own. This star power is something that most leaders envy because they can never hope to have the same effect on the masses.

“Nitin Gadkari was one of the first to witness the waves of people that came to see me when I spoke at a stadium in Nagpur. For the first time, they had to lock the gates and put up a notice that there was no more room inside.”

Paradoxically, while displeasure was displayed, the delight in having a magnetic star campaigner was also evident.

“Name any top leader of our party and I can say with confidence that I was asked to campaign for him,” said SS. He reeled off the candidates for whom he had pitched in with his star power at one time or the other: Chimanbhai Patel, Keshubhai Patel, Narendra Modi, Yashwant Sinha, Arun Jaitley, Uma Bharti, Rajnath Singh, the Late Gopinath Munde, Vasundhara Raje. “Why, for that matter, I have campaigned even for Atal Bihari Vajpayee, imagine for the Prime Minister himself,” he said, feeling very good about it. “I addressed about four meetings with him. On his last day of campaigning, there were only two speakers on stage – Atalji and Shatrughan Sinha.

“The crowds came to see as well as to hear me. So it was not just star power but oratory skills too. Yes, I campaigned for the same Uma Bharti who was expelled from the BJP, against whom action was taken by the party, and who has now asked that action be taken against Shatrughan Sinha,” snorted SS. “The same Uma Bharti used to say even to Atalji, ‘I couldn’t have won this election without Shatru bhaiya.’ I addressed five meetings in a day for her, I campaigned an entire day for her.” It was an instance of how equations had changed between then and now.

But the popularity had come at a price even then.

“One instance of ours becoming a party with differences showed up when my own party workers tried to drive a wedge between Atalji and me,” he said regretfully.

“At Gandhi Maidan in Patna, I was purposely taken to the venue at the wrong time when Atalji was still speaking. When I reached, the crowds went so berserk that Atalji had to stop speaking. It was no fault of mine. I would never dream of upstaging him. But he was very gracious as he said, ‘*Main jaanta hoon, yeh bheed Bihari Babu ke liye hai* (I understand that this crowd has turned up for the Bihari Babu).’ He added with his great sense of humour, ‘*Lekin Bihari Babu jaante hai ki yeh bheed Atal Bihari ke liye hai. Ye Bihari Babu hai toh main bhi Atal Bihari hoon* (But Bihari Babu knows that this crowd is for Atal Bihari. If he’s Bihari Babu, I’m Atal Bihari).’

“People within the party were so jealous that it was self-defeating.”

By the time his second term in the Rajya Sabha ended in 2008, SS became so comfortable in the seat that he looked forward to a third term as well. But another rude shock awaited him.

“It’s possible that some people wanted to get rid of me because the politics turned unpleasant,” he said reflectively. “Perhaps they were trying my patience so that I’d react and leave the party in a huff.

“For the first time, I also saw Advaniji in his politician’s avatar,” he said, his desire to be forthright overriding diplomatic correctness. “He called me home, gave me tea and biscuits.” SS imitated LK Advani’s trademark mannerism of rolling his hands like he was washing them, and continued, “He then asked me, ‘Shatruji, what do you think of going to the Lok Sabha this time?’ I realised that there was politics being played over giving me a third term in the Rajya Sabha.”

It wasn’t the first hint.

“Earlier, at a National Meet in Baroda too, he had sounded me out about taking on the responsibility of becoming President of the party in Bihar State,” he remembered. SS had replied that he was willing to take on any responsibility the party wanted to repose in him but wondered if managing the day-to-day functioning of an office would suit his personality. “Advaniji also realised that it would dilute my stature as a star campaigner,” he remarked, as he went back to the party denying him a third term in the Rajya Sabha.

“When Advaniji brought up the question of contesting a Lok Sabha seat, I reminded him that when I had been reluctant to go to the Rajya Sabha, it was he and the party who had convinced me that I would be invaluable in the Upper House; we needed to strengthen our party there. He then used the logic of convenience and said that more than two terms was not in keeping with the party norm.” SS drew attention to several notable exceptions. “Many party leaders like Arun Jaitley, and my friends Ravi Shankar Prasad and Venkaiah Naidu were given a third term in the Rajya Sabha.”

SS had his reasons for wanting to stay on in the Rajya Sabha, at least until election time.

“There was one more year for the 2009 elections. I would have had to give up my house in Delhi and relocate again,” he stated pragmatically. “I, therefore, suggested that he could give me a Rajya Sabha seat for a two-year term to facilitate my stay in Delhi, and after elections, I could give up my seat and go to the Lok Sabha.” It was a clever suggestion to make because in case he lost, he would still have the Rajya Sabha seat to fall back on.

It was not an acceptable alternative with his party leader.

SS spoke out, “Why I say that I saw the politician in Advaniji that day was because he started washing his hands again and then said, ‘It won’t come across well to be in the Rajya Sabha and contest the Lok Sabha elections. It won’t do justice to your image.’”

There was no door left to explore but to accept the party decision with grace. “Besides, Advaniji’s wish was my command. But I was surprised that just like the time after I’d lost to Rajesh Khanna, I was once again left to my own devices,” he said, stung by the indifference. “There was no offer to help me stay somewhere or to even give me a car.”

Fortunately, SS was a successful man in his own right. “So for one year, I paid the market rent and fended for myself,” he wryly smiled. “It was Jaswant Singh who’d helped me out at that time when he wrote to the Housing Committee and

said that what was being done to me wasn't right."

During the ensuing one year of political wilderness, he saw lopsided policies being followed unabashedly by his party.

"Meanwhile, Rajiv Pratap Rudy, who was then a good friend of mine, was given the Rajya Sabha seat for two years and allowed to contest the Lok Sabha elections while he was there. Shouldn't what's right for Peter, be right for Paul too?" he questioned. "But that wasn't the case anymore and I realised that it had become a case of, 'Show me the man and I'll show you the rule'. Unfortunately, Rudy lost the elections and retained his Rayja Sabha seat. I could've done that too."

What seemed to hurt SS even more was that he had been told that his third term was in the bag which meant that it had slipped out of his hands at the last moment due to a shadowy play of politics.

He said, "Before the third term was due, I had met Rajnath Singh at Jaswant Singh's office. He had requested me to step out with him for a quiet word and then asked me who would be right for the second Rajya Sabha seat that would soon be vacant. He suggested CP Thakur. I said, 'He's a good man but what about the first seat?' He told me unequivocally, 'The first seat is yours, no question about it.' It meant that despite what Advaniji had said to me, a decision had been taken to give me the seat a third time. So it was big-time politics which was being played with me. My good friend Sushmaji had also said on television that Shatrughan Sinha will remain in the Rajya Sabha, he's our party asset. I believe even at 11.30 am, she had been assured that the seat was mine. But by evening, two other people were given those seats. The party with differences had reared its head again."

For a while, he was temporarily mollified when, "Advaniji told me that I would have the right of choice to pick whichever seat I wanted from anywhere in the country, to fight the Lok Sabha elections."

But when tickets were distributed in 2009, there were obstacles in his path. "As usual," remarked SS. "I was told that a prominent BJP leader and lawyer was keen to contest from Patna Sahib. But I had been so badly let down over the third term in the Rajya Sabha that I didn't succumb to any pressure this time."

SS famously took matters into his own hands and in an unprecedented move, announced Patna Sahib as his seat. "Before the party could make any statement, at a place called Sampatchak, I made the popular statement, 'Patna Sahib seat is my first choice, Patna Sahib seat is my second choice, and Patna Sahib seat is

my last choice.’”

It caused the expected uproar in all quarters of the party. It was unheard of for a candidate to choose and announce his seat without consulting or getting a green signal from his party. “Some of the decision-makers felt shortchanged that without pampering or sucking up to them, I had declared my own seat,” he sneered.

Unafraid of the consequences, he described the reactions that had swiftly come in. “Rajnath Singh had supported me at that time but not openly because he is a seasoned politician who keeps room for a bit of manoeuvre. But Sushma Swaraj was unstinting in her support. She had my back when she said even on TV, ‘Yes, the party had promised him that he could choose any seat he wanted. And if Shatrughan has chosen Patna Sahib, then Patna Sahib is his.’”

SS admitted to a special fondness for Sushma Swaraj and her husband. “When Sushmaji and I are photographed together, we are known as the long and the short of the BJP,” he laughed.

“But the short is more mature,” he conceded, before taking a serious look at how he was constantly being undermined. “There were all kinds of underhand attempts to deny me the Patna Sahib seat but I was adamant.”

In 2009, there was another attempt to offer him the alternate bait of a ticket from Delhi. “They tried to make me stand from some place where the party had lost by over two lakh votes. Advaniji also spoke to my wife Promi and said, ‘He’ll lose if he stands from Patna.’”

The reality was something else.

In 2009, the BJP did get voted out of power but not in Patna Sahib.

The total no of votes polled in the constituency was 5,52,415.

Shatrughan Sinha romped home with 3,16,549 votes – more than 57% of the total votes polled.

The RJD candidate came a distant second with 1,49,779 votes.

Shekhar Suman (Congress) polled 61,308.

Shatrughan Sinha won Patna Sahib by a margin of 1,66,770 votes.

“Lo, and behold,” gloated the winner. “I won with the highest-ever margin in Patna Sahib. Uday Singh, a gentleman-politician from Puniya, also from the BJP, and I were the only two to win with such a record margin from Bihar.”

History repeated itself five years later in 2014.

“This time too, the dirty tricks department tried to keep me away from the electoral fray,” he affirmed, confirming the many rumours that had surrounded his candidature. “I’m a loyalist, I have never changed my party,” he stated, before he talked of the machinations of men who shall remain unnamed. “People within our party who are renowned for changing loyalties tried to influence me to contest from Delhi once again. They came up with some really illogical reasons like, ‘You can influence the party from Delhi.’ But Patna is the capital of Bihar. You mean I cannot influence the politics of my State from here?” he countered incredulously. “My constituency would have felt let down if I had not fought this election from Patna Sahib.”

In 2014, the politics within his party had almost brought him to breaking point, almost up for grabs to an Opposition party.

“People from AAP approached me,” he confirmed. “Nitish Kumar always spoke well of me. He always called me Bihari Babu, the pride of Bihar. I was fortunate to have friends in all parties. When my mother died, Kingmaker Lalu Prasad Yadav (whose wife Rabri Devi was the then Chief Minister), gave her a State funeral though I kept telling him not to. Laluji was one of the first to come to offer condolences and he stayed till the end. How can I ever forget that gesture?

“When his daughter got married and the BJP boycotted it, I defied everybody and attended the function. Responding to Lalu Prasad Yadav and Rabdi Devi’s warm invitation was a question of personal integrity and *sanskar.* We fight on issues, not on a personal level. Similarly, I was the only BJP member to attend Sonia Gandhi’s *iftaar* party (an evening event when Muslims break their day-long fast during the holy month of Ramzan) a few years ago. I have drawn inspiration from many Congress men like Sunil Dutt. He had started the anti-tobacco and cancer care campaigns, and was like an older brother to me. I watched and learnt from him to pursue social obligations.

“I am friendly with Ram Vilas Paswan and his children. His son Chirag seems to have a bright future in politics. I get along with everybody and that’s why none of them have campaigned or talked against me.”

In fact, according to him, there were enough options available to him if he were to leave the party. In a startling moment of candour, he communicated, “In 2014, if I had not been given a ticket, I would have stood as an independent.”

He paused to discuss Sushil Modi’s hand in the tussle for the Patna Sahib seat. “Sushil Modi contributed much to the growth of the party in Bihar,” he said in

his praise. “And I first heard that he had told the party, ‘*Inko chhedna mat,*’ don’t test his patience.

“But later, I learnt about the other side of Sushil Modi. I’m told that till the end, he strongly opposed me and fought against my getting the ticket from Patna. My popularity and clean image, and my respectability and acceptability among the masses, made him very insecure, although I have always maintained that I am not interested in being Chief Minister of Bihar. I neither wish nor desire nor expect it. On two occasions, Advaniji wanted to make me CM, so did Atalji. But given a chance, choice or priority, I have always maintained that I would rather be a minister at the Centre where I can serve both Bihar and the country.

“However, Sushil Modi was given to understand that I desired to become the CM and so he fought tooth and nail to stop my getting the ticket again.”

SS had an alternative – to fight the Lok Sabha elections from Delhi. But he was adamant that he wouldn’t set foot out of his constituency.

He disclosed, “Dr Harsh Vardhan who is a very close and dear friend was in charge of Delhi and he called up saying, ‘I’m keeping one seat in Delhi for you just in case there’s a problem, *lag raha hai ki gadbadi ho rahi hai* (it seems like there’s some confusion, trouble brewing) over your seat in Patna. So I’m keeping one seat in Delhi for you just in case.’ I told him, ‘Patna Sahib is my first, last and only choice. I will fight only from Patna, Patna, Patna. I won’t go anywhere else.’ Late evening, when my name was finally announced from Patna Sahib, Harsh Vardhan released that seat to Bhojpuri actor Manoj Tiwari.”

Whatever the backroom politics, once SS got the ticket and put his campaign into full throttle, he became the face of the BJP in his State again. Putting aside the past, he also took a small break from his own campaign to go to Delhi and campaign for ‘dear friend’ Dr Harsh Vardhan.

On this journey, he also made the happy discovery that for every manipulator who schemed, there were also helpful hands that aided his campaign. “Nand Kishore Yadav, an excellent strategist from the local unit, was very supportive. He was the Urban Development Minister, an MLA, leader of the lower house in the State,” he noted with gratitude.

The fleeting thought of bidding farewell to his party was also relegated to the past. There was honesty when he professed, “People go through confusion, through depression, and they could toy with the idea of leaving the party. I did too. Once, when I was in two minds about the party, Sushma Swaraj had cooled

me down and said, ‘Shatrughan, even if they cut me to pieces or pull out my hair, I will never leave this party.’ Her resolve gave me the strength to stay on.

“There have always been passing thoughts about it but I never did leave the party nor did I ever convey such a decision to anybody,” he articulated. “Besides, I’m sure I’m not alone in this. Perhaps Advaniji may have also thought about quitting at some point. Maybe the thought struck Narendra Modi too at some stage when he was being troubled and dropped like a hot potato. I consider him a very big hero because he stood up to and took so much with a great deal of maturity. What he achieved in Gujarat was unbelievable – I’m told about twenty-four hours water and electricity for everybody. And after he had achieved all that, some party workers still didn’t talk well of him. He too faced dirty politics and came out on top. So what I went through and the thoughts that crossed my mind were not unique to me.”

There seemed to be an easy lapse in the elephantine memory because before 2014, SS himself had not hailed Narendra Modi as prime ministerial material.

The politician in him, however, claimed otherwise.

“I was the first one to put forward his name as a potential Prime Minister and Yashwantji had seconded it,” he resolutely asserted. “But,” he explained, “other people felt that he was controversial. They told me that people take note of what you say and alliances are breaking. So don’t take Modi’s name as Prime Minister.”

If the perception persisted that before Modi was officially declared the BJP’s candidate for the top job, SS had not enthusiastically thrown his lot behind him, he clarified, “I always said that Advaniji was our *marg darshak,* our guide. I said that along with youth power, you also need experience. I always maintained that our party had many able, suitable, mature and very committed leaders like Sushma Swaraj and Rajnath Singh. Acknowledging the proficiency and ability of our leaders did not mean that I did not applaud Narendra Modi’s strengths and suitability as well. On the contrary, I’d say that having so many gifted and accomplished leaders was a matter of pride for our party and gave unique strength to the BJP.

“In fact,” he attested, “‘Namo’ was a title that I gave Narendra Modi in Patna. I called Sushil Modi ‘Sumo’ and Narendra Modi ‘Namo’. The names went viral. I also titled him Action Hero because I believed he was and is a man who believes in action.”

On May 14, 2014, when the election results started pouring in, SS was upbeat.

Poonam, Kussh (with his ubiquitous camera capturing every jubilant moment) and boxes of cheery *laddoo*s, accompanied the winner to the District Magistrate's office to receive the final seal of victory – the Praman Patra that declared him the winner of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections from Patna Sahib.

The total number of votes polled had shot up dramatically from 2009, indicating an enthused electorate. In the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, approximately 45.3% of the electorate in Patna Sahib exercised its franchise.

Patna Sahib polled a total of 8,82,262 votes.

Shatrughan Sinha cornered 4,85,905 votes.

Kunal Singh of the Congress was a weak second with 2,20,100 votes. And this was the total figure of the Congress-RJD combine.

SS had once again sailed through comfortably with a buoyant 2,65,805 margin between him and the second.

As the BJP made a stunning win all over and stormed the Lok Sabha with 300+ seats, it was time to move on. "I am a loyalist and I will do whatever the party wants me to do," declared the victor.

But the party with a difference was definitely the party with one difference – it had a senior member who was as incorrigible as he was valuable, a loyalist who stood up for seniors like LK Advani even as he disclosed their partisan politics, and a man the party leaders were often tempted to rap on the knuckles but cautious about handling.

During the Assembly polls in Delhi in February 2015, the ever-smiling RSS man and Chief Minister material Dr Harsh Vardhan would drop by at SS' Talkatora Road bungalow without a fuss to take him on the campaign trail. The Cabinet Minister for Science & Technology counted SS as a friend and for good reason. Theirs was a friendship that went back to the nineties.

In 1993, when the RSS had asked Dr Harsh Vardhan to contest the Delhi elections, SS was his star campaigner in the Krishna Nagar constituency.

The ENT specialist-turned-politician became Health Minister of Delhi after that election and immediately worked on making one of his dreams come true – make India polio-free. "We took almost nine months to organise the first pulse polio immunisation programme on October 2, 1994, in Delhi," the doctor elaborated. "Shatrughan Sinha was the first celebrity I contacted. He graciously agreed to record the first spot where a celebrity exhorts mothers and society in general to take their young children for polio immunisation to one of the 4,000

*kendra*s (centres) we had set up in Delhi. Later, we also recorded it with Shabana Azmi. They were the first two big names we contacted and they were both very supportive.

“I had recorded Shatrughan Sinha’s spot in Ashok Hotel. Sonakshi who is such a big star in her own right today, was sitting in his lap when it was recorded. That spot is still available and is a part of the huge history of polio eradication in this country.”

It wasn’t only SS’ star power that sealed the friendship. “I also noticed that he’s very sharp,” revealed Dr Harsh Vardhan.

SS, who was an MP, astutely kept track of Dr Harsh Vardhan’s involvement in tobacco control. Later, when there was a debate in Parliament, he casually dropped in on his friend at his Chanakyapuri residence.

“I was then the Health Minister (Delhi) and he came to me without any ego, asking me to tell him everything about the tobacco programme and the statistics related to it. I spoke to him for over an hour while he listened. I talked continuously, giving statistics and details. After I’d finished, he repeated practically everything I’d said, without any difficulty. It was later reported that he gave a brilliant speech the next day in the Rajya Sabha.”

When SS himself became the Health Minister of India, his interactions with Dr Harsh Vardhan touched a different level.

“The polio movement had grown from Delhi to the national level and to other South-East Asian countries and I actively pursued it with Shatruji at the national level,” stated the doctor. “I was the advisor to WHO for South-East Asian countries and we had invited Shatruji to our office. There was a lot of excitement that day because being a star, he had his own following and he was also the Health Minister. They had organised a big meeting there where he addressed the gathering as Health Minister. He had a fine grasp of things. He had briefly discussed a few things with me the previous day and he must have also read up on it. He gave an excellent speech related to health issues with a lot of data.”

When Harsh Vardhan became President of Delhi BJP, SS was one of his regular star campaigners. “During the MCD elections in 2007, which we won with a very handsome margin, we were the two main campaigners. We addressed many meetings together. We usually go together,” the doctor smiled. “Usually popular film stars are not down-to-earth in their human relationships. But human threads matter to Shatruji. He’ll remember small things about individuals.

“When my brother’s daughter, who’s also a doctor from Melbourne, was getting married, she said, ‘I want only one guest at my marriage,’ and she named Mr Shatrughan Sinha. His reply to that was, ‘Wherever I am, I will come to the function’, and he did.”

Dr Harsh Vardhan noted with satisfaction that SS joined the BJP, “When it was a two-seat party. I believe that the BJP is the only party that can serve national interest. So I believe that he also must have that nationalistic streak in him for him to have joined the BJP. Over the years, we saw him work steadfastly for the party whether or not he was given a position.”

They belonged to the same party and they campaigned together as friends. But they were two strikingly dissimilar personalities. Dr Harsh Vardhan was self-effacing and he disliked and dispensed with celebrity trappings (like a red beacon car or a jeepful of security). He was also placatory in his speech and given to much diplomacy.

He was aware that his friend tended to be completely contrary to all that he embodied. “Shatruji is outspoken and his feelings are non-political,” he accepted. “But I feel there is a need for a few people in politics who can speak the truth with guts. Personally, I cannot be as outspoken as him. People may call it discipline. But I don’t think it has anything to do with my being an RSS person or him not being one because I wouldn’t call his outspokenness indiscipline. After so many years, he cannot change and the party also knows it. This habit might have harmed him. But he speaks his heart out despite that. These are inherent traits.”

The plain truth was that SS was an MP in the Lok Sabha but after the 2014 victory, the new dispensation had kept him away from the front line.

For a diplomatic, disciplined RSS man, it was an uneasy area to go into but Dr Harsh Vardhan thought that perhaps, “His being outspoken could be a reason though I have no proof of it. I personally feel he could’ve been given far more important and prestigious responsibilities, considering his intelligence and his popularity. He probably deserves much more than what he’s got so far. I think he has been delivering dedicatedly. But I also think that we should work with dedication without expecting any reward. Leave the rest to karma, to destiny and to God’s desire. That’s how I personally look at things.”

Despite SS’ many outpourings of disappointment against his party, Dr Harsh Vardhan observed, “I personally don’t think he will ever leave the BJP. He may be outspoken and may say anything anytime. But in his heart, I feel, he is

wedded to the ideology of the party."

Sixty-one-year-old Dr Harsh Vardhan's observations about SS were endorsed by the party's seniormost leader, eighty-eight-year-old LK Advani. Advani's choice of words was as spartan as the tiny portion of *poha* (snack made with flattened rice), fruits and milk that he nibbled on for breakfast.

Overlooking his seniority, when the party had pitched Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister, the octogenarian had told himself, "*Kya farak padta hai?* What difference does it make to me? The amount of affection and respect I have got from the party or from the people would not have increased if I had become the Prime Minister."

He used the same clinical approach to SS' grievances and retaliated in a dramatically dissimilar manner. In fact, it was no retaliation at all.

Advani had a long and enriching association with the Hindi film industry. In fact, "I could understand Hindi only because of cinema."

His fondness for the medium led him to Shatrughan Sinha. "I remember his movies like *Kaala Patthar* with Amitabh," he said.

He had his own way of looking at SS' claim that he went into politics only because of Advani.

"In a way that's correct," he nodded. "Until Vajpayeeji was the PM, that's up to 2004, he and I ran the party together. He was senior to me by three years but since our Jan Sangh days, we two worked together, right up to the time he was active. Therefore, all those who came into the party, would like to attribute it to him or to me."

He acknowledged SS' unwavering stance that LK Advani was the ultimate leader and, brushing aside the grouses, preferred to look at the positives of denying the actor a third term in the Rajya Sabha.

"He wanted a third term. I said, 'I'm not in favour of it, you should go to the Lok Sabha. You are popular, you will win.' And he heeded my advice."

He smiled at the contradictions in SS' politics because, after feeling bitter about being denied a third term in the Rajya Sabha, the tables had turned. In 2014, as in 2009, he fought for a Lok Sabha ticket and wouldn't consider going back to the Upper House. "There were people who wanted him to go to the Rajya Sabha so that his seat (Patna Sahib) would be available for them," observed Advani, "but he said, 'No, I want to go to the Lok Sabha.'"

SS' petulance that Advani and the party had indulged in 'Show me the man

and I'll show you the rule' politics, and that he was de-housed when he was not allowed a third term, did not draw a heated rejoinder.

Very calmly, Advani countered, "I have myself been in the Rajya Sabha for three terms. It's not like a person after two terms is told, go to the Lok Sabha. But I felt that Shatrughan had it in him to go further. Normally a politician's life increases if he's a member of the Lok Sabha. The Rajya Sabha is a gift from the party. I was complimenting him when I asked him to stand for elections because I knew he was popular."

Neither SS' carping about his party bosses nor his cosying up to the Opposition had a perceptible effect on the seasoned politician who had his own perspective on fraternising with people with different political leanings.

"Shatrughan may be friendly with Lalu or anyone but that doesn't affect his commitment to the party," he firmly believed. In fact, he lamented that in public life, friendships were scrutinised and politicians were constantly asked, "*Uske saat mitrata kyun* (Why the friendship with that person)?"

Sipping on ginger tea, he explained why SS' friendship with all shades of politicians was not to be categorised as traitorous to his party. "It's strange," observed Advani, "that in social relations, untouchability is a sin. According to the law and the Constitution also, it is a crime, it is illegal. But in political relations, if a party does not practise untouchability, it is considered wrong.

"When Atalji's Government was formed (for the second time) in 1998 and we were sworn in, in the morning, he named me Home Minister (the Deputy Prime Ministership came later). In the evening, he phoned me and said, '*Keral ki khabar suni? EMS (Namboodiripad) ki death ho gayi* (Have you heard the news from Kerala? EMS is dead)'. Then he said, 'Tomorrow morning is his funeral. There's also going to be an all-party meeting, CM AK Anthony will be there. Do you think we should send someone?' I said, 'We should, and if you feel it's okay, I can go myself.' He said, 'That will be very good.' That was the first official function I attended as Home Minister, to participate in the funeral of EMS and to participate in the all-party meeting." In other words, attending the funeral of a CPI leader did not contradict his political loyalties.

He further complimented SS and observed, "If a person is in the field of cinema and a political party accepts him even in Parliament and in Government, then obviously he has some other qualities also, and not merely dialogues. A person has to be reasonably intelligent, may not be a scholar, and if he has wit and humour, they are assets for a person in any field. Above all, he must be

honest and that he is.

“The most important thing is commitment and he has it.”

Reluctant to discuss SS’ grey areas, he mildly suggested that SS’ litany of grouses about being sidelined is probably his biggest flaw.

There was one more point that the elderly statesman put forward with the wisdom of his vast experience. It was an acknowledgement of SS’ courage.

“You need guts to be in politics, especially in a party which was consistently and most of the time opposed to the government,” he analysed. “To be in a party condemned by the government or called a communal party, needs guts. I always say, if a Muslim comes into our party, he needs more guts than a Hindu.

“A person who joined the Jan Sangh or the BJP, especially when it was in the Opposition, had to be gutsy,” he said, recognising and lauding SS for having stepped in when the party was in the wilderness.

On the face of it, the soft-spoken LK Advani who measured his words as much as he did his food, and the hearty, sometimes brash SS who loved the sound of his booming voice and revelled in being a foodie, may not seem to have much in common. But apart from belonging to and sticking to the same party which had occupied the Opposition benches for most of its life, and for weathering all the storms in the BJP, the two unlikely members of the current dispensation, were surprisingly similar in being fearless about taking a stand. Their methods varied vastly, their personalities differed drastically but certain essential character traits were peculiarly similar.

One of Advani’s non-BJP guests on his fiftieth wedding anniversary celebrations in February 2015 was Amar Singh, considered a political untouchable by most parties. Brashly uncouth in his speech, there seemed to be little he could share with the soft-spoken patriarch of the BJP. Or with SS who wasn’t known to spew abuse in Hindi or English.

But Amar Singh was another politician who counted SS as a close friend.

Sharing common friends like Late Prime Minister Chandrashekar brought Amar Singh and SS together. Over the years, the former Samajwadi Party leader discovered that what they had in common was, “We’re not three-dimensional people.” Three-dimensional people, according to Amar Singh, were those who nursed one thought in the mind, held a different one in the heart and spoke out a third one.

But Amar Singh didn’t think SS made a comfortable fit in politics. “He’s not a

diplomat and he's full of self-esteem. In politics, you have to sometimes be servile and sycophantic. For someone who's already a celebrity, whose name is an adjective, this is not possible," he explained.

At the same time, he believed that SS the politician could not be ignored for long. "The Prime Minister went to Mumbai only to attend his son's wedding, he did not club it with any other programme," said an impressed Amar Singh. "Mr Modi did not go to Salman's sister's wedding. Salman's a bigger star than Shatrubhai today. But Shatrubhai has a certain dignity and stature. He doesn't play second fiddle to anybody. Shatrubhai is not subtle, he is loud and clear. If only he schemed a bit, went a little out of his way to placate someone…but he couldn't be bothered," Amar Singh shrugged as he summed up, "For all that, he hasn't lost much. He has lived without compromising."

SS' penchant for keeping track of bureaucrats made him a very proud man when fellow Bihari Anil Sinha became the new Director of CBI. They shared the same surname too, "As many Biharis do," smiled the man in the CBI hotseat.

However, unlike the Bihari Babu who flaunted his roots, the upright officer never looked at himself as a Bihari. "I am from the Bihar cadre," he conceded. "But I also studied in JNU, Delhi. So I'd look at myself more as an Indian than confine myself to a parochial sector."

As Director, CBI, Anil Sinha felt 'happy' that his friend was a rare politician who had no FIR or Income-Tax investigation or criminal case against him. "I definitely wish there'd be more people like him."

One inconvenience that Anil Sinha associated with SS was, "He's a security nightmare."

He particularly remembered a rally in Samastipur after VP Singh had become the Prime Minister. Anil Sinha was then a Senior Superintendent. "Arrangements had been made for 30,000 people but lakhs turned up. Every big leader was there, VP Singh, Mulayam Singh, Devi Lal, Lalu Prasad," the CBI Director reeled off the celebrity roster. "But the crowds wanted to hear only one person. No other leader was allowed to speak until Shatruji took the mike and said, 'You have to listen to the national leaders.' He invited them to speak and then came down from the stage. But getting him to safety was a nightmare. I had no alternative but to ask him to get into my car and personally take him away."

It is not surprising that friends opposed to the BJP ideology often referred to him as the right man in the wrong party. SS was never tainted as communal.

This is a true story that few know about. In 1992/93, at the height of the Hindu-Muslim riots in Mumbai, a red Maruti car bearing the number plate 786 went from Juhu to Bandra on a quiet mission. Driver Ashok drove to a hotel on Linking Road, fetched a guest and took him to Ramayan. It was Yahya Bukhari, son of the then Shahi Imam of Delhi Jama Masjid, and brother of the current Imam, who was being whisked away to safety by SS and kept in his bungalow until he could be put on a flight to Delhi the next night.

Incidentally, the Maruti car with the 786 number also belonged to SS.

His family's secular colours were tested very early in his life. School friend from Kadam Kuan, Mahmood Alam ("Mahmood Miya," to SS) recalled, "Just as he and I were close friends, his Amma and my Ammi were also *saheliyan* (friends). During a wedding, there would be an exchange of gifts and clothes like it happens within a family. If there was a wedding in my family, Amma would send clothes for the new *dulhan* (bride)."

A staunch Congressman who even contested an election against BJP heavyweight Sushil Modi from Patna Central, when Mahmood Alam took out a procession as candidates normally do in India, his first stop was Bhuvaneshwar Niwas. "The best thing was that Amma came out to meet me. It never crossed her mind to question that she was Shatrughan's mother, such a big BJP leader's mother. In a *thali* (platter) with flowers and sweets, she came out, did an *aarti* (puja) and *duayen di* (blessed me). When she was asked about this, she simply said, '*Ye bhi mere bete hai* (He too is a son to me).'"

The Congressman went on, "If you ask me whether there has been any change in Shatrughan or not, I would say that because of his stardom, his huge success, he is not able to mingle freely with the public. It's not his arrogance, it is his *majboori* (helplessness). But as a representative of the people, he must make time for them, they must be able to approach him, meet him easily, have easy access to him," he advised.

Mahmood Alam who curiously bore a close resemblance to Congress' *bête noire* Narendra Modi, predictably maintained that instead of being a part of one party only, "Shatruji should be a part of *poore* (entire) Hindustan."

SS' other Patna loyalists had no issues with the party he had aligned with. Pradeep Gupta became his polling agent. Pravin Kumar Sinha, the one with film star looks, who took the more sober option of an MSc in Chemistry, took over the running of his friend's BJP office in Patna and looked after the MP's fund for development.

“Over the years,” contemplated Pravin, “what has changed is that he has matured far more than the rest of us. When he was Minister for Shipping, I was a trustee with the Bombay Port Trust. I once went with him to a studio to record a short speech for New Year. He went over his speech for a minute and in one take, he rattled off twenty to thirty lines without forgetting a comma or fullstop. I could never have done that. He told me that it was because of his training. But I was amazed at his photographic memory.”

Although SS often came across as loud and boastful, sometimes even conceited, Pravin perceived his friend as someone who never spoke about his own successes as a politician.

“He has done many things as an MP but because he is not in the habit of harping on his successes, his good work can even go unnoticed. He is behind the building of a Rs 7-crore pipa bridge or pontoon bridge which will benefit four to five lakh people as they will have easier access to their village and cut their travel by fifty miles. Some may complain that they can’t sit and talk to him. He has his limitations, like he cannot walk barefoot on the roads with the people because it will create a law-and-order problem.”

There was affection of a different kind in the voice of BJP stalwart Sushma Swaraj (currently Minister for External Affairs), when she spoke about the man she first knew as an actor. “When I was the I&B Minister, I even went to clap for him as an audience when he played a policeman in *Khakee*,” she smiled. “I’d seen his films earlier too and knew him as Bihari Babu.”

Once they met and got to know each other better as party workers, Sushma Swaraj found that he had broken, “The *dhaarna* (notion) that actors in politics are only crowd pullers. When he speaks, the style is his own, like an actor delivering his dialogue, so that people are satisfied that they are getting what they have come to hear. But the message he gives is always political,” she smartly observed.

To the BJP will go the eternal credit of having been the first political party in India to give a film star a berth in the Union Cabinet. Sushma Swaraj pointed out, “The decision (to make Shatrughan Sinha a full-fledged Cabinet Minister) was not mine, it was Atalji’s with Advaniji’s support. But it had definitely been established by then that Shatruji was not only an actor, he was also capable of handling a bigger responsibility. A lot of thought was given to it before he was made a Cabinet Minister. He was not made a minister to accommodate or to represent the film industry. It was only to give the country a good administrator,

a good minister. And he made a capable Health Minister, then a good Shipping Minister. I took over the Health portfolio immediately from him, and he had done some good work as my predecessor. For instance, he had taken the initiative of looking at spurious drugs; he had formed the Mashelkar Committee during his tenure. When I took charge, I simply took it further and brought the spurious drugs bill into effect but the *gathan*, the initiative was taken by him. He also took the polio campaign forward, so he did do some good work in the Health Ministry."

If his quick-fire statements were an embarrassment for the party, Sushma Swaraj chose to look at it as a seasoned politician. "There are quite a few here who are not actors but also talk too much. So why single him out?

"If I had to pick on a flaw, I would give him *sanyam ki salaah* (advice on patience)," she said candidly. "In politics, whatever is on your mind doesn't always happen immediately. Very often, you have to wait quite a bit for things to happen your way. It is necessary to be patient, especially in a cadre-based party like the BJP. If Shatruji can be a little patient, *thoda aur sabre rakkhein*, then he would be a better politician," she advised.

She added, "*Thoda sanyam barat jaye toh achcha ho jata* (If he could restrain himself a little, it would be good) because in politics, nothing you say stays within four people. By the time it travels, *arth ka anarth ho jata hai*, the meaning gets twisted disastrously. So you unnecessarily end up making enemies," she cautioned her party colleague.

She dismissed the observation that he was the right man in the wrong party. "They used to say that about Atalji too," she waved it away. "I think it is a left-handed compliment to give any person. I don't even consider it a compliment. Only those who don't understand the BJP, talk like this."

She was also confident that whatever his grouses, SS would never leave the party.

"He never really talks of leaving the party or of joining another party," she pointed out. "He talks *bebaki se* (fearlessly), it's his USP. But *tikey rehenge* (he'll stay on)," she said.

That was the firm belief of senior politician Yashwant Sinha too. In his well-stocked library at home, the former Finance Minister of India chuckled that because they shared the same surname, SS and he might even be 'distantly related'.

Sinha believed that Shatrughan had gone beyond playing the glamour boy the party once used to pull in the crowds. “This kind of general statement about film stars-turned-politicians does not apply to Shatrughan Sinha; he has been an exception to the rule,” analysed Yashwant Sinha. “He started taking an interest in politics when he was at the peak of his career in the film industry. That’s not the time to look for an alternate career. Secondly, his has always been the politics of the Opposition which proved that he did not come into politics for some immediate gain. Anyone who did politics of convenience would have gone to the ruling party. But, like me, he drew his inspiration from Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Narayan.

“When the BJP emerged as the ruling party along with its alliance partners in 2004, it was almost unexpected. By then, Shatrughan Sinha had put long years in the service of the party,” Sinha went on. “Though belatedly (a small chuckle), he was amply rewarded with a ministerial berth. He was clear in his mind that he would not accept anything less than a Cabinet berth. Anyone else in his position might’ve been very happy being a Minister of State but he waited for his turn until he was offered a Cabinet berth.

“With his long years in politics, he has matured into a political leader,” Yashwant Sinha remarked. “So, today I would say that he combines the best that there is in an actor and in a politician. I have been with him at many public meetings and people have gone back impressed with what he had to say, with the message he was trying to convey and that is very important.

“There has been a lot of growth in him. For one, he has mellowed greatly. When he first came in, he was not an easy person to deal with.”

Yashwant Sinha backed that remark with an incident that he was witness to. “I was handling the election campaign of the Janata Dal in 1989 and Shatrughan Sinha was highly in demand as a star campaigner, perhaps more in demand than anybody else at that time. He went to UP and there was perhaps something lacking in the administrative and police *bandobast* (arrangements), with the result that the crowds got a bit unruly and he came back very unhappy. He sent word to me that if proper arrangements were not made, he’d have to cancel all his future programmes. That would’ve been a disaster of the first order. I remember I left all my work and went to see him at a hotel where he was staying and we talked and I persuaded him that it might’ve been the failure of the local administration, we’d make sure that such failures didn’t happen in the future. ‘But don’t cancel your programmes for God’s sake, carry on and we’ll take

special care.' He agreed. He was very quick-tempered at that point of time, very touchy about things. He has mellowed much though this aspect of his character has not vanished completely. He's still difficult to please," he assessed honestly.

In a cadre-based party like the BJP, if it seemed incongruous that one member should be accorded special attention, Yashwant Sinha put it simply as something SS did not have to ask for because, "*Woh attention mil hi jata hai* (Anyway he gets that attention). If by chance he isn't noticed, I trust he has the maturity today to put up with it even if he didn't have it earlier.

"Both of us have gone through ups and downs in our careers, and on most occasions, we have consulted each other. We have also discussed inner party issues. He has often taken positions in the party which may not have been entirely to the liking of the party bosses. Whenever he has consulted me, I have tended to be the sobering influence (because Shatrughan tends to be volatile). I wouldn't say that he has a tendency to put his foot in his mouth but occasionally it does happen.

"Shatrughan Sinha is here to stay in politics, in our party," said the senior Sinha. "If his was a fleeting affair with politics, it wouldn't have lasted almost four decades."

Sahib Singh Verma, former Chief Minister of Delhi, bestowed the title of Hanuman to film producer and Censor Board Chief Pahlaj Nihalani for standing by Ramayanvasi SS' side through decades. Hanuman followed SS to Delhi too, and became almost as close to Yashwant Singh as the actor himself.

Pahlaj became privy to many of SS' political adventures.

He noted that other politicians were generally wary of SS, "Because of his popularity and face value which he never lost whether his party was in power or not."

He remembered a National Executive Meeting of the BJP in Bhubaneshwar.

"All the party bigwigs were there and two to three lakh people had gathered to hear them. There was a gallery of top names from the NDA on stage," Pahlaj described the event. "Atal Bihari Vajpayee was giving his speech when Sonu entered. People immediately started turning around to see Sonu and there was a ripple of excitement. It prompted Atalji to say, 'Shatrughan, *abhi aap hi aake boliye, main bait jata hoon* (You come and address them, I'll sit down).' It was embarrassing and one could at that moment see the reaction of Pramod Mahajan and others. According to me, that was the turning point when the Late Pramod

Mahajan and the Late Gopinath Munde and their coterie noted his immense popularity and worked overtime to have him sidelined," charged Pahlaj like a loyal aide. "Mahajan was dead against Shatrughan Sinha and that's why in the 1998 government, he didn't get a berth in the first and second Cabinets. Sonu was quoted extensively when he said, 'Whether a *mantri* (minister) or a *santri* (security guard), I am here for the party. I am interested in *seva* (service), not *meva* (the perks).'" The catch-phrases were typical of the film star-turned-politician.

Pahlaj also believed that his friend had an uncanny ability to accurately size up a political situation. "He knows his politics," he avouched. "In 1990, he said, 'Chandrasekhar will be the PM' and people were shocked. With fifty-two seats, how could he be the PM? But Sonu had the vision and a point of view. He had forecast it for VP Singh too."

Watching his political prophesies come true, was a matter of pride for SS himself.

"I was the first person to stand up and declare that Naveen Patnaik would be CM of Orissa, the worthy son of a worthy father. Naveen Patnaik too acknowledges it to this day. My party had even been upset with me for declaring it then," SS put in with a smile. Some things had evidently not changed.

"I had predicted Kejriwal's victory also. And I had said that the Grand Alliance in Bihar was very strong, the writing on the wall was clear."

SS' party was not amused in 2015. After he was marked as a dissenting voice for a major part of the year, he was pointedly but quietly struck off his party's 'star campaigner list' during the Bihar Assembly elections in October 2015. On the other hand, every time SS fired a salvo or a tweet, there was predictable applause from BJP's main opponents, Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav.

Even as the election fever peaked in Bihar, SS continued to meet Nitish Kumar. Although the actor and the Chief Minister were both aware of how their meetings would be perceived, SS would drive into the Circular Road residence of Nitish Kumar without even the customary stop at the security gate, and be accorded a hearty welcome. It was the same at Lalu Prasad Yadav's bungalow. And JD(U) Spokesperson and Rajya Sabha MP Pavan Verma also shared the bonhomie of a close comrade with SS.

"*Aaj se thodi jaante hai*? (It's not as if this is a recent friendship)," Nitish Kumar pointed out, shrugging off the implications of SS' visits. "His real *pehchan* (identity) is that of being the pride of Bihar, as the man who brought

samman (honour) to Bihar through his art, through the film medium. *Hum log ke man mein, aadar ka bhav hai* (In our minds, we have only respect for him)."

Playing politics with customary dexterity, the JD(U) Chief who returned to the CM's seat with a thumping mandate in November 2015, remarked, "*Jahan unki pratishta ka sawaal hai* (When it's a question of his prestige), if he is hurt, the whole of Bihar is hurt. When the BJP needed him, they paraded him all over the country but *matlab nikal gaya, toh pehchanne se inkaar karne lage* (After using him, they refused to give him due recognition). Everybody knows what he did for the BJP in its initial stages, and then they dropped him like a hot potato? We have all been watching what's been happening (to SS). We all know how much he did for his party. The party didn't get established on its own."

The Opposition leaders had a field day treating SS' wounds as their own and were clearly upbeat with his protestations. Nitish Kumar commented, "He is renowned for fearlessly airing his opinions in public. If there's a change in this personality (trait) of his, his uniqueness will be finished, *khaasiyat khatam ho jayegi*. It's his USP. Chandrashekharji (Late Prime Minister) was known for saying what he thought was right. Some would be pleased, some wouldn't be. But *woh apni jagah kaayam rehte thay*, he stood his ground. It's the same with Shatruji.

"Shatruji *apni samajik sadbhav ke pakshdhar rahe hain* (He believes in social harmony and stands by it). He has his own opinions. I feel his *nazariya* (view) is different from that of his party, so his (contrary) opinions sometimes surface.

"Irrespective of his political affiliations, we are his *himayati, prashanshak*, his admirers. He is our pride. To be a part of a political party is a small part of his life, we don't give it much importance. He will be welcome anywhere irrespective of the party. *Unka swagat hoga*."

The BJP minus SS, or Bihari Babu without his right-wing party was a welcome prospect, even if Nitish Kumar fell short of unconditionally throwing his doors open to the actor-politician.

"He doesn't need a party," Nitish Kumar remarked, side-stepping the pointed question. "If Shatrughan wants, he can stand as an independent. It would be our pleasure to support him. I don't see any *gunjaish* (scope) for it right now. But he's most welcome."

In the bungalow opposite Nitish Kumar's, his electoral ally echoed the same sentiments but was ready to welcome SS into his party, the RJD.

“Shatrughan Sinha Pataliputra *ke putra hai*. *Cinema jagat mein Kayasth samaj ka beta bade oonchayiyon tak Bambai mein jaake kafi sanghursh karke establish kiye…pehle pankti ke (frontline) desh ke jo kalakaar hai usme apna sthan banaya….nazdeek se nahin lekin door door se Bihar ka bachcha bachcha jaanta hai unko, hamara Bihari Babu, us roop mein jaante hai* (He is the son of Pataliputra. This son of a Kayasth reached the peak in the world of cinema after struggling in Bombay and became one of the front-rankers of the film industry. Every child in Bihar knows him. They know him as our Bihari Babu).

“It is said that (people from the) Kayasth *samaj* (society) are *kamzor*, weak. But look at Shatrughan Sinha. Though born in a Kayasth family, *ek se ek pehelwan ko, patakkar marte thay cinema mein* (…he could take on the strongest of bodybuilders in his films).

“He is a very close friend of ours, *bahut nazdeeki mitra hai*. We got to know him from the time he entered politics, *rajneet mein aate aate jaan pehchan ho gayi*.”

The *mitrata*, friendship, was on display when Lalu Prasad gave SS’ mother, Shyama Devi, a State funeral on her demise. “*Ek maiya ka beta itna oonchayi tak gaya to unko sammaan dena, unko pratishta dena humra farz tha* (It was my duty to give a State funeral to the mother of a son who had reached such heights of success). *Yeh apeksha bhi rehti hai logon mein. Humre paas* power *tha toh rashtriya samman ke saath, unko salami de karke, Amma ko vida kiya* (People expect it of you too, and since I had the power, we bid farewell to Amma with respect and with a salute).”

He appreciated SS maintaining cordial relations with him, irrespective of party compulsions. “*Rishte rakhna chahiye.Yeh aadmi mein woh gun hai* (One must maintain relations, he has that quality in him).”

Unlike statesman Nitish Kumar who measured his words and feigned that party affiliations didn’t matter, Lalu Prasad said, “When he joined the BJP, *mujhe takleef huyi ki Shatrughan Sinha ko sara desh maanta hai, ee ka kiya* (I was troubled because the whole country knew him and what had he gone and done)?”

But, added the RJD chief, “*Sarvajanik roop se* (publicly) *humne kaha* (I said this): despite being with the BJP, I can issue a certificate that this man is not communal.”

Lalu also talked of SS’ statements that had put his party in a spot during the Assembly elections and about the actor’s uninhibited association with the

Opposition. He observed, "*Agar Lalu Prasadji ko milna hai, ek hazar kuch bol rahe BJPwale logon ko, lekin woh parva nahin karte, parva nahin karte ki party unko kya karegi* (If he wants to meet Lalu Prasad, irrespective of how his party takes it, he doesn't worry about the consequences or the outcome of his actions). He is so innocent, like a Yadav-va."

Lalu echoed the same line as Nitish over the BJP tossing aside a man after using him. "*Jab zaroorat padi to* use *kar liya.* Rural area *mein bhi BJP ko pahunchane mein inka haath tha, kafi yogdan raha ha.* Contribution *hai.* They used him, *woh theek nahin hai* (He had a hand in popularising the BJP in the rural areas, he made a definite contribution to the party. But they used him and that's wrong)."

Unsurprisingly, he also justified SS' cannonade against his own party. "*JP ne kaha tha, kisike bhi galat raaste ka datke virudh karna* (JP had said that you must strongly object to anyone who's on the wrong path). *Agar Shatrughan Sinha ne sahi baat ko kaha* (If SS spoke the truth), it shows he's not hungry for power. *Is aadmi ke zehen mein chaaploosi nahin hai, ye hamara* finding *hai about SS. Aajkal tel malish karne wala jyada hai aur sahi baat ko bolnewala kum hai, rajneeti mein* (I find that this man is incapable of sycophancy. In today's politics, there are far too many sycophants and too few who say what's right).

"After all, Shatruji *ne kya galat kiya* (What wrong has he done)? This is a democracy. *Hum to bolte hai ki hamare yahan aapka sthan hai* (I openly say that we have place for him in our party). If he needs our support, we are there for him, *samarthan denge*. He's a good man. Our doors are open for him, twenty-four hours, *bilkul swagat karenge*, openly *bola hai* (we'll definitely welcome him, I'm saying this openly)."

What was important to note was that the grand sweep by Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav, with Lalu winning even more seats than the sitting Chief Minister, underscored SS' political canniness. He knew his politics, he had sniffed which way the wind was blowing and had stated it fearlessly, however uncomfortable it made his own party.

Perhaps a political observer outside the BJP would have a more objective view of precisely where Shatrughan Sinha stood in politics today. Executive Editor of NDTV Hindi, Abhigyan Prakash, a journalist with a ringside view of and an opinion on everything to do with Indian politics, watched and commented on the SS-BJP roller coaster.

“Where I would say that Shatrughan Sinha’s grudge against his party is justified is that he joined the party when it had a hope in hell,” Abhigyan shrewdly noted. “When he came in, he was a star, not the BJP. So when he says that he hasn’t been treated fairly by the BJP, his point is valid. There was a time when nobody knew that one day there would be a BJP Government in power – a Vajpayee, an NDA-formed government that would last for six-and-a-half years, and now a solid government with Narendra Modi as Prime Minister. So I strongly feel that Shatrughan did not take the conventional route, some would even say it was the wrong route.

“I know there were a lot of problems when he was made a minister (in the Vajpayee-led Cabinet). The political dynamics within the BJP had changed in such a way that it took a lot of pushing himself, a bit of lobbying etc, to become a minister whereas it should’ve been given to him earlier. But I have to mention that the same happened to Sunil Dutt as well in the Congress because a lot of people take film people lightly, at least in North India. It is exactly the opposite in the South where they are taken very seriously. In North India, the general perception is, they’re just film heroes, call them to rallies to wave out to the public, have photographs taken but don’t take them seriously as politicians.

“His becoming a minister, therefore, surprised many. You wouldn’t question it when say, Yashwant Sinha who is not an original BJP man, he was actually a Chandrashekhar man, straightaway became the Finance Minister of the country. It wouldn’t have been questioned if the Late Pramod Mahajan or Sushma Swaraj was made a minister. But you would question a Shatrughan Sinha being made a Cabinet Minister because he was a film star.

“There have always been lobbies working against him within the BJP,” disclosed Abhigyan. “People like Arun Jaitley and Pramod Mahajan were always against him.”

Tearing down the bias against a film star in public life was as tough a struggle for SS as it was for a lanky scarface from Patna to make it as a film star in Bombay. If he did it, it was against a daunting stack of odds, including the fact that he was essentially an outsider in the BJP.

“One disadvantage you have to accept is that Shatru is not an RSS guy,” pointed out Abhigyan. “He is a film star; his cultural upbringing is very different and it has to be. He’s not rooted in the RSS culture and discipline. So he was always a bit of an outsider phenomenon.”

Abhigyan also believed that the film star trait of wanting ‘Yes men’ around

him trailed SS enough to exclude really astute advisors from going anywhere him. “He was always surrounded by people who knew that if they said ‘Yes’ to him, it worked better,” charged Abhigyan. “So I don’t think he ever had people who could show him the mirror. And that is very important because in politics you’ve got to have people who’re slightly critical, people who’ll guide you better. But this is the film star syndrome because that’s how a hero is treated in the film industry.”

On the other hand, SS had natural skills to handle a career in politics. “Quote me on this,” said Abhigyan. “Shatrughan Sinha is a typical Bihari. By his social upbringing, he is a politically astute man, not sharp but astute. He understands politics, he’s certainly not naïve. He knows what a move could be, what a counter-move could be; he has great PR skills of his own but the biggest failing is that he has never been able to build his own people in politics. Even in Patna, his own party workers worked against him, the party cadres worked against him. There were lots of people who wanted to bring him down.

“What the party also feels is that because he is Shatrughan Sinha and the media will carry his stories, he gives his *bayaan* (opinion) at any opportunity (which sounds like he’s going to leave the party) and that’s not sensible politics. Even when his ticket was being decided (in 2009), I don’t think there was any debate on it because he was the best candidate for it which he proved by his victory but by then he had done so many things, made so many statements, started hobnobbing with so many people that even within the party there was the feeling *ki yeh kya aadmi hai, kya* commitment *hai* towards us (what sort of a man is this, where’s his sense of commitment).”

Strangely, across the border there was the belief that SS was committed to Indo-Pak peace.

The imposing Taj Mahal Hotel on Man Singh Road in Delhi had turned into a fortress when the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif was in residence as a guest of India’s new Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The day after Modi’s swearing-in ceremony, SS’ car drove in unchallenged with the posse of security men fawning over the celebrity. Security checks, frisking, even the mandatory x-ray of handbags were waved aside as he strode into the hotel with his team of four. The staff beamed, the men in khaki were thrilled. Even the security personnel on Sharif’s floor sported wide smiles of recognition as SS’ team was ushered into Nawaf Sharif’s presence. Sharif too, had his team of officials by his side, including the hawkish Sartaj Aziz.

The PM spent a minute wiping a speck of dust that bothered his crisp white shirt, and then sat back with a smile. SS' men brought in boxes of *kaju katli* (cashewnut sweetmeat) and a huge box of *kulfi* (traditional Indian ice cream) for the PM to take back to Pakistan. SS had, it transpired, astutely found out what Nawaz Sharif was fond of, and had come armed with his gifts accordingly. At the end of the visit, the VIP Pakistani too, had something for SS. He sent him home with two green boxes – delicious almond cookies from a Karachi bakery.

During the meeting, apart from inviting SS to visit him again in Pakistan (the two had met even when Sharif was in the Opposition and the Zardari Government was in power), the PM from next door said, "People like Shatrusaab can play a very important role in fostering good relations between the two countries."

Sharif acknowledged that SS had a vital part to play in public life, especially with his party's overwhelming majority in the Lok Sabha.

"It would be nice if we could have one team from our side and one from India with men like Shatrusaab in it to bring the two countries closer," suggested the PM. And then he paid him the best compliment that the leader of another country could pay an Indian citizen. Sharif said, "If we had Shatrughan Sinha on our side, we wouldn't need anybody else in our team."

For SS, the compliment was far sweeter than the almond cookies.

But on home ground, SS continued to throw his political googlies. He himself fuelled speculation when he disclosed that a few years ago, an astrologer had predicted he would move to another political camp. "He predicted that I would change my party just once in my political career," SS made a full-throated disclosure. "I hope, wish and pray it doesn't come true but this prediction was made."

Headlines were always just around the corner.

8

Inside Ramayan

Some people don’t believe in heroes. But they haven’t met my dad.

Anon

For a man who lost his way as boyfriend and husband, and who preened over his masculinity, Shatrughan Sinha made an indulgent, gentle father. He greeted the birth of his twin sons, Luv and Kussh in 1981 at Nanavati Hospital, as double proof of his masculinity, with friends firing 21 gun shots in the air from his bungalow in nearby Juhu. But the he-man turned to putty in his children’s hands, especially in the chubby grasp of his baby girl, Sonakshi.

After fathering three children, SS may never know how to change a nappy or burp an infant but as a provider and protective dad, he got a definite thumbs-up.

“I know I’m the apple of his eye and I’ve always taken full advantage of it,” Sonakshi’s eyes glinted as she nonchalantly accepted the basic fact. Although Sonakshi lapped up the attention, the realisation that she had a celebrity father hit her much after infancy.

“It was only in school, when I began to be introduced to people as Shatrughan

Sinha's daughter, that I realised he was someone special. What he was all about, built up gradually. As we grew up, and began reading and watching more television, we got to know more about Dad as a famous personality."

The man with the booming voice who never failed to pull up anyone or put anybody in his place, made an unexpectedly tender father, a dad who never even raised his voice, let alone his hand.

"Dad has never been a strict father," Sonakshi frowned at the mere suggestion. "He has never raised his voice with me even once. Maybe he has a couple of times with the boys but never with me. Even if I had to be corrected, it would come through Mom and never directly from him."

Sonakshi had heard umpteen times about his gaunt, tanned, dishevelled look while shooting for *Antarjali Yatra* which had prompted her mother to burst into tears, thinking he was disappointed with the birth of a girl child. Sonakshi giggled at the visual and happily accepted, "Ever since that day, I have been the apple of his eye. I've been the most pampered kid around. I know it and he knows it and we're both okay with it!"

Poonam's erroneous conclusion that her husband was unhappy to have a daughter was actually at variance with what had transpired with the Sinhas a few months earlier. After having twin boys, when Poonam conceived again, her husband was reluctant to have a third child, more so when a sonography had mistakenly concluded that it was once again a male foetus. But Poonam had been adamant about going ahead with the pregnancy and SS had relented.

Sonakshi had been updated on that as well as she said, "I know my mom's sonography had shown a baby boy but she'd wanted a girl and was really praying for one. But I think I am more a boy, I'm not really a girlie-girl. My brothers treat me like a boy. I feel I've been brought up like one."

That may be one of the reasons why, despite watching her mother perfect the role, Sonakshi never groomed herself to be the lady of the house. "No," protested Sonakshi, "I told you I'm one of the boys. When the time comes to do it, I guess I will. I have enough on my plate right now."

There was a clear demarcation about what was Mom's territory and where Dad ruled. "When there's something personal that I want to discuss, I always find it easier to tell my mom than my dad," said Sonakshi. "I still won't be able to discuss boyfriends or a crush or anything like that with him. Nor has Dad ever asked me about anything. I think it embarrasses him to talk to me about personal things. He's there only for the pampering, for the loving, for the fun and the

jokes."

Most definitely for the pampering. Plump little Sonakshi had thrown a tantrum on her first day in nursery school and had insisted that Dad carry her in his arms to her classroom. "On my first day at Arya Vidya Mandir, my classroom was on the first floor but we didn't know that and he took me all the way to the fifth floor," she grinned. "I insisted on being held in his arms, so he had to carry me up five floors and then carry me back to the 1st floor. But he did it gamely. In fact, I've never seen him irritated about any of these things. Dad is one of the calmest, most unfazed people I know."

SS actually enjoyed his role as father to three. "He always made it a point to be with us on every birthday and every anniversary, and insisted we be together on New Year's Eve," revealed Sonakshi.

What he never insisted on was a great report card from her.

"That was Mom's territory," Sonakshi laughed. "Dad must have come for one Open House Day in school when I was in Std IV or V, and that too because I'd insisted on it. Of course, he came along happily; he'll come anywhere for me. I had found out by then that he was a star and dude; I wanted to show off! But as far as our studies were concerned, neither of them ever pressurised us, which I think made us want to do well on our own.

"I think Dad has balanced both roles very well, as a public figure and as a father," Sonakshi applauded. "I always knew that if I called him anywhere, he'd be there for me. I called him once for a college function when I was at Jai Hind (Churchgate) and he drove down to South Mumbai to be there. He's also very nice and jovial with my friends. To this day, he calls one of my close friends, *ronewali ladki* (the weepy girl) because she once cried in front of him while watching a movie or something."

Poonam Sinha was the one steadying presence at home who devoted herself to raising her four children (SS included) and then found time to be a businesswoman as well. Poonam handled the finances of the family, kept a close watch on investments and supervised every move made by any of the Sinhas. As SS often said proudly of his wife's abilities, "I don't keep track of even one rupee. Promi is the one who manages all the money in the family."

After Ramayan, the Juhu landmark, was damaged in the floods that ravaged Mumbai's suburbs in July, 2005, it was Poonam who took it upon herself to demolish the bungalow and construct a large eleven-storey building in its place with a duplex apartment for each member of the family.

For all SS' macho ways outside, it was Poonam who wore the pants in the Sinha house. Those close to the family always knew that SS couldn't function without Poonam. "Only she can handle Dad the way she does," observed Sonakshi.

Of the three children, it was the daughter who made a sure-footed foray into films, like her dad, and inherited most of his qualities, the admirable and the avoidable. Sonakshi was also the pampered and portly brat with a pair of specs who'd waddle up with her father whenever he was called on stage to give away an award. When SS proudly showed off his daughter at every given opportunity, neither father nor daughter realised that he was preparing her for a lifetime in the limelight. But she cherished those moments.

"He always took me on stage at awards functions," she remembered, "and he'd always say, 'She's my award, my lifetime achievement award!' I used to love the attention I would get the next day in school when everybody would say, 'We saw you on TV!'"

But she wouldn't accept that this early exposure to the limelight had much to do with her becoming an actress in her later years.

"I won't say that it was the beginning of my wanting to be an actress," she ruminated. "Becoming an actress just happened. I became fat, so I couldn't even think of becoming an actress. I was happy with my fashion designing, I was doing really well. Without any pressure from home, I would want to do well in my studies, I was topping every year. I'd set my mind on becoming a fashion designer. Strangely, even when I was fat, people around me would tell me, 'You must get into acting,' and I'd ask, 'How? Have you seen me?'

"Dad always gave us freedom; he'd made it clear that all of us could do whatever we wanted to in life, as long as we didn't compromise the dignity of the family. So he was okay about my getting into fashion designing.

"I was fond of sketching, I do sketch very well. I think Mom used to paint too. I like sketching clothes and girlie-figures, very fashion-oriented. When I'm painting, I do faces."

Dad Shatrughan was not adamant about his children getting a basic degree before branching out. "I did a three-year diploma course in fashion designing and he was fine with it," Sonakshi pointed out. "After one year of Junior College at Jai Hind and one year at NM College, Juhu, I did three years of Fashion Designing. But both Luv and Kussh are degree holders. Luv graduated in Mass Communication (through Webster University in Thailand) and Kussh did Mass